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Scenes of Reading: Forgotten Antebellum Readers, Self-Representation, and the Transatlantic Reprint Industry

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SCENES OF READING:
FORGOTTEN ANTEBELLUM READERS, SELF-REPRESENTATION, AND THE
TRANSATLANTIC REPRINT INDUSTRY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Marianne Mallia Holohan

May 2013

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Marianne Mallia Holohan

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By

Marianne Mallia Holohan

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ABSTRACT

SCENES OF READING:
FORGOTTEN ANTEBELLUM READERS, SELF-REPRESENTATION, AND THE
TRANSATLANTIC REPRINT INDUSTRY

By

Marianne Mallia Holohan

May 2013

Dissertation supervised by Thomas Kinnahan, PhD

“Scenes of Reading: Forgotten Antebellum Readers, Self-Representation, and the Transatlantic Reprint Industry” argues that African-American and white working-class people participated in transatlantic antebellum literary culture in a far more central and sophisticated manner than has been assumed. Employing “scenes” of reading—self-representations of what, where, how, and why African Americans and the white working classes read—as primary texts, this dissertation asserts that these groups, in differing degrees and under distinct circumstances, were able to learn to read, to appropriate reading materials from mainstream literary culture, and, most importantly, to transform their acts of reading into acts of politicized self-representation. Their literary practice was possible because of the transatlantic reprint industry that flourished during the antebellum era resulting from the lack of a copyright agreement between Britain and America. This

meant that in both nations, texts from across the Atlantic could be reprinted and sold more cheaply than domestic texts, making novels, poetry, and non-fiction available to wider readerships. Reprinted texts in multiple inexpensive formats were ubiquitous, allowing even marginalized readers to encounter them in the context of everyday life. More importantly, reprinted texts legally belonged to no one, meaning that they could be appropriated by anyone, including black and working-class groups whose political values threatened to undermine accepted social hierarchies. With no permission or payment required for reprinting, reprints were easily grafted into new ideological contexts, meaning that black and working-class newspapers had access to free literary content that they could employ toward counter-hegemonical self-representations. The practices and implications of reprinting enabled free blacks, slaves, and white workers to participate in mainstream literary culture subversively through “underground literacy”: set of literary practices that were counter-cultural yet also dependent upon the apparatus of mainstream print culture in order to carry out subversive aims. Reading reprinted texts and assimilating them into the context of their everyday lives, African Americans and the white working classes in America and Britain formed similar strategies for practicing literacy beneath the surface of a transatlantic print culture. This dissertation examines scenes of reading that exemplify these underground reading strategies and represent the literacy of these groups.

DEDICATION

To my father, the late Frank “Dino” Mallia,
who practiced literacy despite opposition.

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Introduction

Was the act of reading in the antebellum era largely a white, privileged activity? While twentieth-century scholarly narratives of literacy have created “scenes” or representations of reading that answer this question in the affirmative, visions of a more diverse antebellum readership suggest otherwise. One such scene of reading, Richard Caton Woodville’s 1848 painting, *War News from Mexico* (figure I.1), represents a more expansive view of antebellum literacy by illustrating how black and working-class readers, while marginalized, participated in mainstream print culture. At the center of the painting stands a white man, wearing a top hat and his shirt sleeves, reading aloud from an unfolded newspaper to a crowd on the porch of a hotel in an unspecified American town. Closest to this central figure are six other white men, some young and some old, listening to the latest news about the Mexican-American War. These central “readers” in the image appear to be middle-class, some with top hats and cravats, though their class status is ultimately uncertain. More importantly, to the right of these men, Woodville places four other individuals who have also gathered to “read” the newspaper. In the shadows, stretching to catch sight of the newspaper, stands a white man and woman whose working-class status is marked by his straw hat and her checkered bonnet and apron. Meanwhile, an African American man in work shoes and patched trousers is seated on the porch steps, and an African American child in a tattered shirt stands beside him. Like the white men on the porch, these marginalized individuals have focused their unwavering attention on the painting’s centerpiece: a newspaper. They are not content to simply listen, but must also see the printed object from which the news is read.



Figure I.1 Richard Caton Woodville. *War News from Mexico*. 1848. Oil Painting. Private Collection.

While we cannot see its title, the newspaper in Woodville's painting resembles most local and national papers of the era, densely printed in multiple columns with few illustrations and little white space. Along with news from Mexico, the newspaper, like others of its era, likely contained literary texts, as well: poetry and fiction reprinted,

thanks to lack of copyright restrictions, from British and European texts that formed the basis of the antebellum literary marketplace. Like many other antebellum newspapers, this one had been circulated to a popular gathering place where it attracted the attention of multiple readers—not only those who could easily read its miscellaneous content, or afford to purchase a copy for private use, but others in various stages of literacy who relied upon public reading venues and the common practice of reading aloud to have access to print.¹ And after the hotel discarded this issue of the newspaper for the next, opportunities for readership multiplied, as poor yet eager readers seized upon second-hand opportunities to acquire texts.²

This antebellum scene of reading, which could have taken place in a northern, southern, western, or British town, illustrates a microcosm of transatlantic literary culture during this period: while well-dressed white men are the most visible readers, working-class whites and African Americans—enslaved or free—of both genders are undeniably present, “reading” the same text as their presumed social superiors from the margins. Yet, as Trish Loughran has shown, the figures in the shadow of the porch were removed when the painting was reworked for the cover of a 1961 edition of the *Federalist Papers*: the seated black man became white, while the working-class couple and the African American child were omitted completely.³ This re-imagined version of Woodville’s

¹ For a good discussion of antebellum American newspapers—their form, content, and readership—see Thomas C. Leonard’s *News for All: America’s Coming of Age with the Press* (1995), Chapter 1: “How Americans Learned to Read the News.” Leonard states that most readers “went without their own copy,” and that “the pages of the news passed through many more hands” than simply those that purchased the paper (4, 6).

² Enslaved and working-class readers wrote and testified orally about finding discarded newspapers and other textual fragments and using these as reading materials. I discuss this in more depth in chapters 3 and 4.

³ Actually, while Loughran notes the “racial lightening of the black figure in the foreground” and the “erasure of both the child in the foreground and the woman at the right margin,” she does not mention the omission of the working-class man in the 1961 version (107). While this may be a simple error, I think it

painting, meant to represent democratic reading practices in the new republic, ultimately narrowed the artist's notion of how reading took place in everyday antebellum life, erasing white working-class and black readers from the scene, and paralleling the omission of these readers from scholarship of the same period.

Scholarly narratives of nineteenth-century literary history have privileged writers over readers and published writings over archived manuscripts, and therefore have erased groups of readers for whom writing and publication were less accessible. Elizabeth McHenry, in her groundbreaking study, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002), identifies one of these groups: free black readers before and after the Civil War. In her introduction, McHenry states, “[Of free black] readers, we have heard almost nothing; they have been, for the most part, forgotten” (3-4). This has been the case, McHenry argues, because of the “historical invisibility” of their reading practices: the undervalued documents of black literary societies have been discarded or neglected in the archives, while widespread assumptions of black illiteracy have assured that documentation of black literacy remains hidden (4). Yet McHenry's knowledge that, in Toni Morrison's words, “invisible things are not necessarily ‘not there’,” enabled her to uncover the often sophisticated literary activities of free blacks in the nineteenth century (qtd. in McHenry 4).

Free blacks, however, are not the only group of forgotten readers in the nineteenth century. The “historical invisibility” that has kept the practices of free black literary societies from the view of scholars has also effectively obscured the everyday reading

also speaks to how class difference is often overlooked and ignored—one reason why, I argue, working-class readers have been forgotten.

practices of other marginalized groups—namely, enslaved African Americans and the white working class—during the antebellum era in both the United States and Britain.

Despite McHenry's claim that "scholarship in the last decades of the twentieth century made the reading practices of enslaved African Americans increasingly visible," much of this scholarship is ahistorical, focusing on momentary sightings of the "imagined reader" (Wolfgang Iser's term) embedded in published accounts of slave literacy instead of attempting to recreate how slaves managed to acquire literacy even while it was forbidden them (4).⁴ Readings such as these, which view the reader as a textual construct, neglect practical questions of what reading materials slaves would have had access to in their daily lives on a plantation or in a southern town, and how these texts connected slaves to a larger literary culture that included black and white readers across the nation and the Atlantic—including, significantly, their masters. The focus of literary scholarship on authorship and the author's use of literary devices concerning accounts of slave literacy has led to the continued assumption that nearly all slaves were illiterate and therefore divorced from mainstream transatlantic literary culture.

Similarly, the reading practices of the northern white working class have been obscured on one hand by the focus of literary scholars on the middle-class values of nineteenth-century literature, and on the other hand by historians' arguments over whether an antebellum American working class even existed.⁵ Both scholarly trajectories

⁴ See, for example, Sandra Gunning's "Reading and Redemption in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" (1996) and Raymond Hedin's "Probable Readers, Possible Stories: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Black Narrative" (1993), which I discuss below.

⁵ David M. Stewart provides a snapshot of the scholarly debate over antebellum working-class formation and class consciousness in *Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America* (2011), in which Stewart himself joins the faction denying the existence of a cohesive working class, as I discuss below. Similarly, scholarly narratives of mill workers in antebellum Lowell, MA offer contradictory messages about the class status of "mill girls," documenting the hardships of their working and living conditions as well as their labor activism on one hand, while classifying their literacy as "middle class." See, for example, Thomas Dublin's

have led to white working-class readers largely disappearing from narratives of nineteenth-century literary history, particularly as readers. Just as scholars have focused on literary instead of historical evidence of slave literacy, so too have questions of what and how working-class people read and how their reading connected them to a transatlantic literary culture been neglected.⁶ As a result, the assumption persists that working people who read were not actually working class but middle class, causing specifically working-class reading strategies and their political implications to be forgotten.

While African-American and working-class readers of the antebellum period have been largely forgotten by scholars, scenes depicting their reading strategies endure. In addition to Woodville's painting, many other scenes of these forgotten readers remain, even if inattention has rendered them invisible. In "Scenes of Reading: Forgotten Antebellum Readers, Self-Representation, and the Transatlantic Reprint Industry," I highlight several published and unpublished scenes of reading—artifacts describing what, how, when, and why readers read—that have been constructed by forgotten readers themselves, testifying to their literacy. I focus on these literate self-representations in order to argue that African-American and white working-class people participated in a transatlantic literary culture in a far more central and sophisticated manner than has been assumed. Using these scenes of reading as my primary texts, I assert that these groups, in

Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860 (1979) and William Moran's *The Belles of New England: The Women of the Textile Mills and the Families Whose Wealth They Wove* (2002). I discuss this extensively in chapter 4.

⁶ A small body of scholarship about Philadelphia writer George Lippard and the "mysteries of the city" genre, including Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (1998) and David S. Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988) have focused on politicized sensational fiction and its working-class readers, but this scholarship is reluctant, at times, to draw connections between the reading habits of working-class people and mainstream literary culture.

differing degrees and under distinct circumstances, were able to learn to read, to appropriate reading materials from mainstream literary culture, and, most importantly, to transform their acts of reading into acts of politicized self-representation.

Furthermore, I maintain that both African-American and white working-class readers were able to practice literacy in a culture that viewed reading as a privileged act because of the transatlantic reprint industry that flourished during the three decades before the Civil War. As a result of the lack of a copyright agreement between Britain and America, as well as the secondary cultural status of many American authors, mainstream print culture in antebellum America was dominated by texts exported from Britain, written by British and, to a lesser extent, continental authors, and reprinted by American publishers.⁷ This lack of copyright meant that in both Britain and America, texts from across the Atlantic could be reprinted and sold more cheaply than domestic texts, meaning that in both nations, novels, poetry, and non-fiction were available to a wider audience—including African Americans and the white working classes. The transatlantic reprint industry placed “great” and popular titles alike within the reach of marginalized groups because these titles were published in multiple inexpensive forms, such as single-volume editions, serials, or newspaper excerpts, and also because these forms were mass produced and widely distributed. Reprinted texts were everywhere, making it relatively easy for even marginalized readers to encounter them in the context of everyday life, so that even those who still could not afford to purchase texts could sometimes acquire them for free—even while working. More importantly, reprinted texts legally belonged to no one, meaning that they could be appropriated by anyone, including

⁷ For a concise overview of reprinting, see Jeffrey D. Groves’s “Courtesy of the Trade,” Michael Winship’s “The International Trade in Books,” and Meredith McGill’s “Copyright” in Volume 3 of *A History of the Book in America*. I discuss reprinting in more depth in chapter 1.

black and working-class groups whose political values threatened to undermine accepted hierarchies. With no permission or payment required for reprinting, reprints were easily grafted into new ideological contexts, meaning that black and working-class newspapers had access to free literary content that they could employ toward counter-hegemonical self-representations.

These practices and implications of reprinting, I argue, enabled free blacks, slaves and white workers to participate in mainstream literary culture, albeit in a subversive way that I call “underground literacy.” Operating under the surveillance of mainstream culture, which sought to enforce hegemonical notions of race- and class-based hierarchies through public discourse, underground literacy became a way for marginalized groups to acquire and practice literacy despite the oppressive conditions of their daily lives.⁸ Stated in another way, underground literacy describes a set of literary practices that were counter-cultural even while dependent upon the apparatus of mainstream culture in order to carry out subversive aims. Meant to reference the Underground Railroad, the well-documented yet enduringly mysterious system for smuggling slaves from the South to freedom, underground reading resembles the railroad in that it was everywhere and nowhere at the same time: because it was widely assumed that African Americans and working-class whites were inferior and therefore illiterate, their reading strategies were often invisible, despite their pervasive presence. Also, like the railroad, underground reading strategies were dependent upon material circumstances—human bodies and textual embodiment—that formed an integral part of the mainstream literary marketplace.

⁸ I use the term “mainstream” here to describe the dominant discourses of the antebellum era—those that asserted and assented to hierarchical notions of race, class, and gender that defined nineteenth-century social relations. “Mainstream” literary texts are those that were *produced by* or *adapted into* this framework and were accepted by a large and diverse readership.

Just as the Underground Railroad made use of actual railroads and other visible structures, underground reading employed the mainstream reprint industry and its manifestations in everyday life in order to operate. And, even more significantly, just as the Underground Railroad became a far-reaching network that linked blacks and whites in a human chain spanning the nation, continent, and even the Atlantic, underground reading also linked disparate groups through reading strategies. Reading reprinted texts that followed established trade routes but also subtle, underground routes, African Americans and the white working classes in America and Britain formed similar strategies for practicing literacy beneath the surface of a transatlantic print culture. The scenes of reading that form the basis of my argument in this dissertation exemplify underground reading strategies that represent the literacy of these groups.

The dissertation is organized into four chapters. Chapter 1, “Stolen Texts, Stolen Moments: The Transatlantic Reprint Industry and Underground Literacy,” is an introductory chapter that provides historical and ideological background for the transatlantic reprint industry, explaining how it allowed “underground” reading strategies to take shape. Tracing the growth of reprinting from a colonial trade that operated on the margins of legality to its peak as the mainstream print industry in the antebellum era, I argue that the practices of reprinting directly influenced the practices of underground literacy in America and Britain. After establishing the general connection between reprinting and underground literacy, I provide three specific case studies—chapters two, three, and four—that serve as specific evidence for the role of reprinting in the underground literacy of African Americans and the white working class. As such, each coalesces around specific “scenes” or representations of these groups reading.

Chapter 2, “Feargus O’Connor’s *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass’s Papers: Radical Self-Representation, Underground Literacy, and Transatlantic Reprinting,” argues that the Chartist newspaper, *The Northern Star*, and Frederick Douglass’s papers, *The North Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, stand as parallel scenes depicting the British working classes and African Americans as readers during the antebellum era. Both newspapers represent similar underground literacy strategies by supporting communal reading practices and by encouraging the advancement of literacy, serving as a literary primer for the semi-literate and literary miscellany for more advanced readers. Most importantly, the newspapers used their representations of working-class and black literacy to counter negative representations of their readers in the mainstream press—and mainstream culture in general. In order to do so, both newspapers reprinted articles and literary texts from the mainstream press, at times radically re-contextualizing their messages. This recontextualization, I argue, becomes the basis of the papers’ radical messages: that African Americans and the British working classes are literate people worthy of social and political equality.

In Chapter 3, “Haunting the Master’s Library: *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, Slave Literacy, and Transatlantic Fiction in Southern Libraries,” I approach the difficult task of reconstructing scenes of slave literacy. Definitive evidence for slave literacy is elusive because slave literacy was discouraged and, in some southern states, illegal in the antebellum period. Establishing dialogue between sources that provide only partial evidence alone, however, clarifies scenes of slave literacy. In this chapter, I place Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, a recently discovered fictional autobiography most likely written by a former slave, in context with other slave narratives, testimonies, and

letters, as well as the library catalogs of slave owners—including that of Crafts’s own master, John Hill Wheeler—in order to suggest the private southern library as a scene of slave literacy. First, my analysis of three slave owners’ libraries in eastern North Carolina—a state that made slave literacy illegal in 1830—illustrates how northern reprints made their way to the South, despite the notion that the South was a cultural backwater devoid of print. Next, my survey of representations of reading in texts by slaves and former slaves specifically connects slave literacy to print owned by their masters, showing how northern reprints could arrive, through serendipity and subterfuge, in the hands of slaves. Finally, my close reading of reading in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* suggests that Crafts had access to reprinted transatlantic fiction in her master’s library, and that her Gothic representation of reading within the narrative reveals the subversive power of her assimilation of mainstream texts.

Chapter 4, “‘Poets of the Loom, Spinners of Verse’: Reading British Poetry and Writing Class Consciousness in New England Mill Towns,” addresses the invisibility of American working-class readers in the antebellum era by arguing that the underground reading strategies represented in scenes of working-class reading provide a means of viewing New England workers as a cohesive class. Despite what I call the “genteel literacy” narrative that has depicted New England “mill girls” as a separate, literate class since the 1830s, I assert that mill girls, mechanics, artisans, and Irish laborers not only practiced literacy through similar strategies, but employed their reading of transatlantic reprints—particularly British Romantic poetry—to represent themselves as self-consciously working class. I begin by examining how two former mill girls—Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson—ambivalently represent themselves as working-

class readers in their autobiographies, published at the end of the nineteenth century. Despite this ambivalence, their representation of underground reading strategies similar to those of British working-class autobiographers—including the systematic study of Romantic poetry—reveals their working-class status. I then turn to two regional working-class newspapers, the *New England Artisan* and the *Voice of Industry*, showing how both employed Romantic discourse to represent workers as literate and class-conscious. Finally, I question the notion that the Irish were excluded from the practice of literacy by re-examining the availability of education and print to Irish workers in New England mill towns, using the example of the *Boston Pilot*, an Irish working-class newspaper that reprinted the same British poetry as the *Artisan*, to show how Irish working-class literary culture was closely connected to the underground literacy of native-born New England workers.

In order to reconstruct the literacy of forgotten readers, my dissertation poses and investigates the following questions: How did the transatlantic reprint industry allow groups who were discouraged or forbidden from practicing literacy to foster an underground literacy? To what extent does this literacy enable resistance to hegemonical notions of race and class? Does literacy function as a catalyst for the formation of group solidarity and the transgression of social boundaries? How did underground literacy function similarly and differently for slaves, free blacks, and the white working class, and how can their distinct interactions with reprinted texts illuminate connections between groups seemingly at odds? What aspects of literacy and social consciousness did these groups share with the British working class, who were linked to white American workers and African Americans by the industries that employed them, the cultural hierarchies that

limited their social mobility, and transatlantic cheap print? And finally, how can re-discovered scenes of reading enlarge limited definitions of literacy that exclude the semi-literate and oral reading practices of black and working-class communities, reemphasizing the role of these groups as readers in the literary history of the antebellum period?

My ability to ask and begin the complicated task of answering these questions would be greatly inhibited without the trailblazing work of a generation of scholars who, as Book Historians, combine the methods of literary, historical, and anthropological research to write a history of readership from the perspective of “common” readers. Writing in the last three decades, scholars such as Janice Radway, Jonathan Rose, Martyn Lyon, Elizabeth McHenry, and Thomas Augst have shown, in Rose’s words, that “reading has long been a necessity of everyday life for ordinary people,” despite assumptions to the contrary (xi).⁹ Concerned with the reading habits of “ordinary people” in disparate eras and places, and coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, these historians of reading employ similar methods: locating and interrogating sources that have often been undervalued, such as the memoirs and letters of common people, library catalogs and registers, and the records of literary clubs and improvement societies (Rose xii). My dissertation is indebted to this methodological trailblazing, without which concern for common reading practices would be nonexistent.

Of course, writing the history of any kind of readership would itself be impossible without the focus on readers that has been theoretically viable since Roland Barthes and

⁹ See Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), Rose’s *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001), Martyn Lyon’s *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, and Peasants* (2001), Elizabeth McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers* (2002), and Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003).

Michel Foucault dismantled the modern notion of the author as the primary origin of literary meaning, and thus the primary focus of literary study.¹⁰ Yet the turn from authorship to readership has been a slow process in nineteenth-century American studies—even among book historians. William Charvat, now regarded as a founding father of the History of the Book in America, made his name in the field with his seminal study of the economics of authorship, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (1959). Mapping book trade routes across the Atlantic and throughout the nation, Charvat employs American authorship as an organizing principle for his research, which causes him to nearly overlook the practice of transatlantic reprinting despite its centrality to American book trade. The time frame of his study is set by the passage of the first national copyright law in 1790, which made professional American authorship possible, and the construction of the first railroad across the Allegheny Mountains in 1850, which allowed the circulation of a national literature (8). Because of Charvat's focus on authorship, he calls reprinting "disastrous" competition for American authors, because it kept American literature from being "self-supporting," even though he acknowledges that the transatlantic reprint trade ultimately made the American publishing industry possible (9). Charvat also acknowledges that "common" readers were influential to American authors, even going so far as to state that "reciprocity between writer and reader...has been of the essence in our literary history" (22). Yet common American readers do not make many appearances in Charvat's work. Following in Charvat's formidable footsteps,

¹⁰ In "The Death of the Author," Barthes asserts that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of view," and thus, the written text is an "oblique" and "negative" space where "all identity is lost" (277). Therefore, writing refers not to the writer, but to the act of writing itself (279). As a result, meaning cannot be found in the author's identity or intention, but in the meaning that is created by the reader (279). Foucault, similarly, views the author as an "ideological product" in his essay "What Is an Author?" (290). He replaces the author with the "author function," which is ultimately a means of promoting and circulating a text, not a fixed identity (284).

many American literary historians writing from the 1980s until the early 2000s continued to view American authors as the primary object of study, meaning that they, too, marginalized or generalized about American readers and dismissed the transatlantic reprint industry as a distraction from American authors.¹¹ In doing so, a skewed scholarly narrative of literary practice in nineteenth-century America emerged, one in which privileged white American authors were the primary practitioners, and one in which writing instead of reading was the activity of primary importance.

The research methods of the *History of the Book*, as Charvat's work demonstrates, has made the centrality of reprinting to the antebellum American print trade impossible to ignore, even if early practitioners like Charvat did not necessarily like that British-authored texts were reprinted most frequently. Yet, in Charvat's wake, other American book historians have shown that antebellum reprinting should be central to literary historians of the period despite—and at times because of—its transatlantic status. Focusing on publication instead of authorship, Michael Winship's thorough investigation of Ticknor and Field's records posits that the Boston firm's shrewd and successful engagement in transatlantic reprinting during the antebellum period allowed it to invest in American authors now considered prominent.¹² Similarly, Meredith McGill focuses on transatlantic copyright law and its implications for American publishing during the Jacksonian Era in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (2003).

Viewing transatlantic reprinting and the legal battles it brought about as a dominant force

¹¹ Many important studies came out of a focus on authorship, including Carol Cyganowski's *Magazine Editors and Professional Authors in Nineteenth-Century America: The Genteel Tradition and the American Dream* (1988), Susan Coultrap-McQuin's *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (1990), and Michael Newbury's *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (1997).

¹² See Winship's *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields* (1995), as well as his contributions to *A History of the Book in America, Volume 3: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880* (2007), in which he portrays reprinting as an integral part of antebellum book publishing.

in the antebellum literary marketplace, McGill refocuses the literary history of this period on an “internally divided and transatlantic literary marketplace” dominated by “unauthorized reprints” instead of a supposedly coherent “national literature,” and shows how this impacted the careers of major authors (7). Thanks to Winship and McGill, book historians now regard transatlantic reprinting as an opportunity for further research that transgresses artificial national boundaries instead of a distasteful practice that marked the American literary marketplace as inferior and American authors as secondary figures.¹³ Yet both Winship and McGill focus on dominant figures in the literary marketplace—Ticknor and Fields, authors such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Dickens—instead of the marginal players that extended reprinting past eastern urban centers and into the hands of common readers: localized and radical printers, newspaper editors, literary societies, and readers themselves. In this dissertation, I take up McGill’s implicit challenge to engage reprinting as a means of glimpsing the “means and modes” through which “socially marginal individuals” could participate in mainstream literary culture, including readers who seem “profoundly unknowable and unstable” (*American Literature* 17).¹⁴

This profound unknowability of readers—the difficulty of reconstructing past acts of reading—while leading many scholars to focus on authorship and publication, has caused other scholars who attempt to focus on readership to fall into the trap of the ideal

¹³ In their introduction to the collection *Books between Europe and the Americas: Connections and Communities, 1620-1860* (2011), Leslie Howsam and James Raven argue that “a transatlantic history of the book offers a robust methodology and intellectual approach to the history of communities and cultural exchange,” the processes of which were not “passive or linear” but dynamic and creative (2-3). Part of *livres sans frontières*, or the New Atlantic History, several essays in this collection address transatlantic reprinting, such as Michael O’Connor’s “‘A Small Cargoe for Tryal’: Connections between the Belfast and Philadelphia Book Trades in the Later Eighteenth Century,” Aileen Fyfe’s “Business and Reading Across the Atlantic: W & R Chambers and the United States Market, 1840-60,” and Robert J. Scholnick’s “‘The Power of Steam’: Anti-Slavery and Reform in Britain and America, 1844-60.”

¹⁴ Despite McGill’s assertion that Jacksonian print culture could “thrive without native authors,” she continues to use authorship as an organizing principle in her work. Yet she is mainly interested in how reprinters used authors’ names as marketing ploys, showing that her focus on authorship is actually a focus on the author function (16).

or “implied” reader. The product of reader-response theory of the early 1980s, the implied reader is an attempt to understand the process of reading while continuing to evade the research problem of locating actual readers in history. In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1980), Wolfgang Iser accepts Foucault’s notion that the reader is the central creator of meaning, yet he is reluctant to dismiss the author’s power over the reader during the reading process. The text becomes an embodiment of the author’s power, a “set of instructions” that the reader follows through “meaning assembly” (ix). In the interaction between reader and text, Iser argues, there are two kinds of readers: the “real” reader and the “hypothetical” or “ideal” reader which is implied by the text itself, a creation of the author’s desire (27). In order to study real readers, scholars must find documentation of reading practices, which is often difficult, so they often rely upon the text to tell them who its readers are, merging “real” and “ideal” readers (29). Iser himself regarded the “ideal” reader as a fictional entity, a concept that should not be identified with actual readers (34), yet the notion of an ideal reader has influenced scholars’ attempts to historicize reading.¹⁵ One of the first studies to focus entirely on American readers, Steven Mailloux’s *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (1982), appeared two years after Iser’s *Act of Reading* and is clearly influenced by it. Rejecting the textual formalism of New Criticism and arguing for the centrality of the reader in meaning-making, Mailloux makes an argument for the “expectation-fulfillment” model of reading, influenced by Kenneth Burke, Stanley Fish,

¹⁵ Iser did view the actual reader’s role as prescribed by perspectives represented in the text, which include the ideal or implied reader (36). The implied reader is therefore a “conditioning force behind a particular kind of tension produced by the real reader when he accepts the role” (36). The role “prescribed by the text will be stronger,” Iser states, but “the reader’s own disposition will never disappear totally” (37). In her essay “What’s the Matter with Reception Study?” (2008), Janice Radway gives Iser and his colleague Hans Jauss credit for opposing formalism and instead arguing that meaning is a “temporal process of interpretation,” yet she claims that neither could entirely avoid the pitfalls of formalism, continuing to see the reader as part of the text (330).

Barthes, and Iser, in which the author sets the reader up for disappointment in order to “sharpen” the reader’s discernment (70). While this model is supposed to “make...available for description a wide range of reader activities,” including “taking on and rejecting perspectives,” it continues to evade “real” readers and to regard the text itself as an authority on how it should be read (71). Mailloux’s case study, in which Hawthorne creates the character Giovanni in the story “Rappaccini’s Daughter” as the “antithesis of the discerning, ethical reader,” does not provide any information about “actual” readers, but instead points to the presence of a failed “ideal” reader that the author has placed in the text to guide “actual” readers.¹⁶

Unfortunately, Mailloux was not the last to allow implied readers to stand in for actual readers in American literary studies. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the ideal reader was an attractive notion for scholars because of its focus on the power of the text, allowing literary critics to talk about readers while engaging in familiar discourse: the literary close reading.¹⁷ Yet close reading without the help of archival research can tell us nothing new about actual readers, which allows marginalized readers to remain forgotten, even by scholars of marginalized writers. Take, for example, Raymond Hedin’s “Probable Readers, Possible Stories: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Black Narrative,” found in the essay collection *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (1993). In the introduction to this collection, editor James L. Machor criticizes reader-focused scholarship of the 1970s and ‘80s of

¹⁶ In his later essay, “Misreading as a Historical Act” (1993), Mailloux to some degree amends his theoretical stance, calling for “a more explicit consideration of how reading is historically contingent, politically situated, institutionally embedded, and materially conditioned” (5). He focuses on a major writer’s (Margaret Fuller) review of a text (Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*) as historical evidence of reading, which has its problematic aspects: is Fuller an actual reader whose evidence of reading allows her to become an ideal reader?

¹⁷ Radway calls this “order[ing]” reading in a way that continues to privilege the literary critic instead of focusing on the cultural functions of literature (“Reception Study” 333).

“obfuscating a key question: who is the ‘reader’ at the center of its analysis?” (viii).

While the collection purports to historicize reader-response criticism, Hedin’s essay exemplifies how actual readers continued to be ignored. In the essay, Hedin argues that texts produced by black authors in the nineteenth century are the site of a power struggle between writers and the expectations of their white readers. Of course, one problem with this argument is, again, a focus on the literary text itself as primary evidence for readership. But the larger problem here is the assumption that the ideal and actual readers of these texts are white, when historical evidence, if Hedin had supplied it, would have suggested otherwise for at least one of his chosen texts: Douglass’s “Heroic Slave.” In the story, Hedin argues, Douglass employs white observers as narrators who become “mediating white presences” in the text that represent the white reader (187). In his discussion of the story’s readers, Hedin never mentions the original context of the story’s publication: *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in 1853, which was published by Douglass and had black and white readers.¹⁸ Given the very basic facts of this context, it cannot be safely assumed that implied or actual readers of the story were, in fact, white—yet Hedin never even qualifies his assumption that the readers of black-authored texts must have been white, given that whites has more power in the nineteenth century. In this instance, cultural assumptions conflate ideal and actual readers, causing black readers to be forgotten, and again begging Machor’s question of who the reader actually is. This continued focus on the ideal or implied reader has unfortunately upheld assumptions about antebellum readership rather than questioning them.

¹⁸ For more about the context of “The Heroic Slave,” see Robert Levine’s *Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (1997). For a discussion of the readership of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, see Robert Fanuzzi’s “Frederick Douglass’s ‘Colored Newspaper’: Identity Politics in Black and White” (2001).

In order to write a history of actual readers, Radway asserts that scholars must begin with communities of readers, not texts, in order to avoid privileging texts over social practices (“What’s the Matter” 335). This is difficult when dealing with readers from a century and a half ago, however, because the only traces that remain of these readers are texts. It seems that Radway’s major concern in stating this is to emphasize how readers themselves view their reading instead of attempting to fit them into established scholarly narratives. With this in mind, I have focused throughout this study on surviving statements made by African-American and white working-class readers, many from autobiographical texts. Memoirs and autobiographies are particularly important to Rose and his predecessor, David Vincent, in order to establish what and how British working people read, despite the untrustworthiness of autobiographical narratives (2). According to Rose, the “inherent distortions and biases” in these sources do not “disqualify” them as historical documents because “similar uncertainties are built into everything we find in archives and published records” (2). Sharing Rose’s poststructuralist wariness of all texts, and accepting these “inherent” limitations, I regard autobiographical narratives as literary creations *and* historical documents, placing them in context with other types of sources to test the legitimacy of their scenes of reading: newspapers, public and private records, and unpublished writings, among others. This method allows black and white working-class readers to represent themselves, to “write their own history,” in Rose’s words, but also ensures that I am not writing the history of an individual’s reading, but of a specific social demographic’s shared reading strategies (2). Of course, to claim that every individual within a group practices literacy in the same way and at the same level is an absurd overstatement; instead, like Rose, I aim to

establish how a representative sample of black and white working-class people read by balancing texts produced by what may have been the highly literate few with more impersonal records suggesting that the less learned practiced literacy using similar strategies, even while they may not have documented their reading as extensively.

Yet even when scholars employ a variety of historical and literary sources to locate actual readers, they are still in danger of portraying the reader as what Toby Miller calls a “cultural dope,” a “mythic figure” who, in Harold Garfinkel’s words, “produces the stable features of [a] society by acting in compliance with preestablished and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides” (qtd. in Miller 360). For Miller, this becomes a pitfall for two distinct models of reading that have “bifurcated” reception study: the “domestic effects model,” which “relies on methodological individualism, failing to account for cultural norms and politics” that influence the production and reception of texts; and the “global effects model,” which is concerned with how group politics influence reading, such as “the knowledge of custom and patriotic feeling exhibited by collective human subjects, the grout of national culture,” often at the expense of “the potentially liberatory and pleasurable nature of different takes on the popular” and the “internal differentiation of publics” (358, 360). Miller sees both of these approaches as flawed, because both inevitably portray readers as cultural dopes—naïve, passive consumers unable to resist, in Radway’s words, the “coercive power” of the text (360; *Reading the Romance* 7). For Radway, the root of this problem is found in formalism: when scholars look to the text itself to define readers, they accept the outdated formalist paradigm in which texts “control those who purchase and use them because the meanings they conceal within cannot help but be revealed to

readers, even if unconsciously, and thereby must affect their values and beliefs” (8). This paradigm “discounts what readers do with texts,” or in other words, ignores the complicated exchange that occurs during the act of reading, and in doing so, offers a “condescending treatment” of actual readers (8). Yet the problem of the cultural dope is actually a more complex problem that involves scholarly methodology as well as the theorization of power. How should we balance individual acts of reading documented in autobiographies, journals, letters, and marginalia with communal evidence of reading found in newspapers? Should we assume that the act of reading is necessarily an act of power, particularly for marginalized groups and individuals, when they were reading mainstream texts that appear to support mainstream hegemony? What happens when the social power that marginalized readers located in their reading does not fit current definitions of subversive power?

The question of how and to what extent reading was an act of power for marginalized social groups has led some scholars of black and working-class reading in the nineteenth century onto tenuous scholarly ground. On one hand, the discovery that antebellum African Americans and white workers were reading when social hierarchies made it difficult for them to do so imbues the act with defiance of social hierarchies, and therefore, a basis of social power. Yet the tendency of some scholars to consistently interpret minority groups’ reading as an implicitly subversive, politically powerful act has led some reading historians to question whether reading should *ever* be considered radical among marginalized groups. A striking example of this is found in David M. Stewart’s *Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America* (2011), which focuses on historicizing the reading habits of young, white workingmen of the northeast. After reading many

workingmen's diaries, including that of a Massachusetts cabinet journeyman named Edward Carpenter, which Stewart discusses at length, he acknowledges that the act of reading produced ambiguous feelings about the social order in the minds of young workingmen: "if reading produced order and productivity [on one hand], it also caused bitterness and rage" (13). Despite this fair-minded observation, which avoids casting white working-class readers as cultural dopes who either unilaterally followed or rebelled against current norms, Stewart's analysis takes a curious turn. While Stewart provides ample evidence for a connection between reading and moderate political empowerment in Carpenter's diary, he then denies that very connection, instead arguing that reading should be seen as a means of social control, since it "internalized scales of value, justifying status and trapping men like Carpenter between a romance of opportunity and the hard facts of life" while "also reconcil[ing] these oppositions" (19).¹⁹ Tellingly, Stewart's view of workingmen's reading as a means of supporting the middle-class status quo is followed by a rant against scholarship that provides evidence for the antebellum formulation of class consciousness in America, accusing scholars such as Sean Wilentz of making workers "stigmatized objects" of "advocacy scholarship" (20-21).²⁰ It becomes clear at this point that Stewart is reacting against the post-Marxist tendency to view reading among working people as a means of spreading individual empowerment and

¹⁹ Stewart seems to interpret Carpenter's reading as conservative because Carpenter does not overtly mention participating in workingmen's parades, even though he describes them. Stewart does provide several quotes from Carpenter's journal, however, in which he rails against the "aristocracy" in his town and the conditions of mechanized labor (15-16). Because Carpenter was not a visible radical, Stewart dismisses the possibility of Carpenter's political empowerment via reading. This, in my view, is a misunderstanding of the power of reading, as I discuss further below. I discuss Stewart further in chapter 4.

²⁰ For Stewart, Wilentz's argument that, in the urban northeast, antebellum workers were organized and experienced class consciousness is merely a twentieth-century Marxist fantasy. Stewart instead affirms the earlier thesis that American workers cannot be seen as a class until the end of the nineteenth century, when they engaged in nationally visible organizations. I discuss this issue further in chapter four. For Wilentz's argument, see *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*.

class consciousness—to the extent of denying his own evidence that suggests otherwise. As a result, in attempting to keep his subjects from being portrayed as overly radicalized cultural dopes, Stewart nonetheless portrays them as cultural dopes of a more conservative scholarly agenda.

As I have encountered various depictions of African-American and working-class reading, I have had to acknowledge that marginalized readers like Stewart's Edward Carpenter speak for themselves and for their time, not for a current scholarly political agenda, and in writing about their reading, they often oscillate between surprisingly radical and seemingly conservative statements. Newspapers, the mouthpieces of radical organizations, while more coherent in the way they link reading and political agendas, do the same. After looking at individualized and communal scenes of reading, it has become clear that while group consciousness and radical activity are *sometimes* the result of reading, often the power of reading is much more subtle, and therefore, less recognizable to current scholars. Yet acts of reading that seem politically ambiguous now are nonetheless powerful. McHenry agrees in *Forgotten Readers*, in which she joins a group of African American scholars who, since the 1960s, when nineteenth-century blacks were often seen as “silent, inert victims,” have widened notions of resistance to include “covert acts” performed during everyday life that nonetheless became very real challenges to white power structures (16).²¹ For McHenry, black literary societies that could be dismissed as assent to the white, middle-class status quo—which preached self-

²¹ McHenry mentions, in particular, the work of Eric Foner, Eugene Genovese, and Robin D.G. Kelley, among others, as those who have redefined acts of resistance (15). The work of Gayatri Spivak is also useful when considering how dominated groups exercise power, particularly her response to her own essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. While in the essay (1985), Spivak declares that the subaltern cannot speak, in her later revision (1999) she calls this “an inadvisable remark” and broadens her understanding of what can be considered a speech act (2206).

improvement and upward mobility—engaged in acts of empowerment and consciousness-building because they dared to promote reading within the black community. Yet McHenry is careful to note that, when identifying subtle acts of resistance, we cannot see African Americans as a monolithic group, but must instead acknowledge that resistance took multiple forms among black individuals. McHenry’s expanded definition of social resistance tempered with her caution about group generalizations in her analysis of African American literary societies provides a reasonable counterpoint to Stewart’s unstable political position and supports my own model for theorizing the social power of reading.

Scholarship that unintentionally portrays readers as cultural dopes implicitly accepts a polarized, Hegelian model of social power in which the dominant group—in this case, economically privileged white men—welds power over dominated groups, such as working-class whites and African Americans. In this configuration, cultural productions such as texts are controlled by the dominant group, meaning that these texts, when read by the dominated, necessarily assert power over them. Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, uses the term hegemony to theorize discourses of power. While Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, which is part of his post-Marxist theory of class configuration in Fascist Italy, is easy to graft into a polarized conception of social power, Gramsci actually saw power as far more fluid than scholars often recognize when they use the term hegemony. Just as Gramsci’s notion of class is far less rigid than Marx’s, Gramsci posed the idea of hegemony as a more dynamic version of Marx’s ideology.²²

²² Peter D. Thomas traces how Gramsci’s use of the term hegemony evolved from its Russian use during the Bolshevik Revolution, where the term primarily referred to “the leading role of the proletariat among other subaltern classes struggling against the Tsarist regime” (58). While writing the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci used the term to signify bourgeois *and* proletarian discourses of power (60). Many cultural

For Marx, ideology, the main ideas of an age, comes from the ruling class and supports their economic interests; for Gramsci, hegemony controls partially through coercion, but also by winning the consent of the people, which takes place in the public sphere (“Formation of the Intellectuals” 1143).²³ Crucially, contending voices vie for consent, including those from groups that antagonize the dominant discourse. In Gramsci’s scenario, “organic” intellectuals, or those from dominated groups who find a public voice, have access to the power of discourse and can assert an alternate hegemony, winning consent (1141). This notion that hegemony is constantly contested and that readers are able to grant or defer consent affirms my position that African American and white working-class readers were not necessarily in thrall to the dominant ideology of the antebellum era because they read and reprinted mainstream texts, but can instead be seen as active participants in the public sphere, which included literary culture. Like more privileged readers, they both gave and withheld consent to mainstream hegemony, exercising power; they also formed and disseminated their own hegemony, mainly through radical newspapers.

Gramsci’s revisionary idea that ideology does not simply impose a model onto passive subjects is again revised in the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault deviates from Gramsci’s Marxist orientation in that he prioritizes the effects of power on the body (social and individual) instead of on “consciousness and ideology,” and he further deconstructs Marx’s Hegelian view of power, particularly in *Power/Knowledge*

theorists of the late twentieth century use hegemony to name the dominant, controlling discourse, such as Edward Said in *Orientalism*. For more discussion of hegemony, see Thomas’s *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism* (2008).

²³ For Gramsci, there is a distinction between civil and political societies and the way they enforce power. According to Said, who agrees with this distinction, “Culture, of course, is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent” (1995).

("Body/Power" 59). Viewing power as "capillary," as circulating within a social body rather than remaining above it ("Prison Talk" 39), Foucault argues that the relations of power do not obey the rules of the Hegelian dialectic, because once power has been absorbed into the body, that power can be used against those who control it: "there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one's own body against power... Suddenly, what has made power strong becomes used to attack it. Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter-attack in that same body" ("Body/Power" 56). According to Foucault, power does not belong to anyone—no one has power over power itself—which is why he considers "the notion of repression which mechanisms of power are generally reduced to... very inadequate and possibly dangerous" (59). Foucault's notion of power as a rogue force within social and individual bodies challenges the idea that power acts unilaterally upon individuals, necessarily repressing them; instead, he opens up the possibility that repressed individuals have access to power within their everyday lives and can exercise it in a variety of ways. Placing Foucault's idea of power as constantly shifting in the context of marginalized readers suggests, again, that readers are not necessarily passive recipients of the current hegemony when they read mainstream texts, but also that reading becomes an individualized way for marginalized readers to transfer power from the dominant group to themselves. In this dissertation, I view the transatlantic reprint industry as a capillary through which marginalized readers enact this transfer of power. In some cases, particularly concerning black and working-class newspapers, this transfer results in creating a new hegemony, as Gramsci posits; in other cases, it results in highly individualized responses to power.

Gramsci's view of hegemony as constantly in flux and Foucault's notion of power as capillary suggest that in reality, readers are rogues, adapting the information they read in multiple ways—not always in assent to the dominant hegemony. Michel de Certeau, influenced by Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, provides a way to theorize consumption as resistance in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Viewing consumption as a creative act, de Certeau argues against the notion that a product (and its creator) dictates how it will be consumed: the presence and circulation of dominant cultural expressions “tell...us nothing about what [they are] for users” (xiii). While producers and their products (such as texts) attempt to enact discipline, de Certeau asserts that consumers or “users” who are already caught in the nets of discipline can still resist it by adapting products to become their own. Concerning the process of reading, de Certeau calls this act of adaptation “assimilation,” arguing that readers do not assimilate by “becom[ing] similar” to the text they have consumed, but instead by creatively incorporating the text into their own reality (167).²⁴ Using property as a metaphor for texts, de Certeau posits that while writers are “founders,” readers are “travelers” who “move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write” (174). Therefore, as an act of poaching, reading is characterized by “advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text,” a process “playful, protesting, fugitive” (175). Building from Foucault's notion of power as a game, de Certeau provides a more specific way of viewing the process of reading as an act of power that is difficult to characterize according to political paradigms, but one that is nonetheless powerful.

²⁴ De Certeau attributes the assumption that readers passively internalize the texts they read to Enlightenment notions that education is meant to reform society (167).

Throughout this dissertation, I view scenes of antebellum black and working-class reading as acts of power and resistance in the sense that marginalized readers traveled across territory, to use de Certeau's analogy, that dominant society decided did not belong to them. The nature of this territory, the texts produced by the transatlantic reprint industry, was such that "assimilation," or the creative appropriation of texts, was practically encouraged: because of the lack of copyright laws, mainstream and obscure printers alike could reprint texts in different contexts—adjusting and reassigning meaning in the process. The proliferation of texts from across the Atlantic became the main reading materials of black and white working-class readers in America—texts that they shared with white working-class readers in Britain. This shared body of texts, paired with the material realities of their marginalized social status, enabled African Americans, white American workers, and white British workers to establish similar "underground" reading strategies that they documented in autobiographies, newspapers, diaries, testimonials, and letters. By creating scenes of reading that attest to their reading of reprinted texts, marginalized antebellum readers counter negative mainstream representations of their race and class, attesting to the subversive power of their reading and to the at times sophisticated engagement of these readers in antebellum literary culture.

Examining these scenes of reading and what they can tell us about the nature and extent of black and working-class antebellum reading, this dissertation continues the project of bringing forgotten readers to scholarly attention. Given the enormity and limitations of the project, however, the resurrection of these forgotten readers is far from complete. "Scenes of Reading" is, ultimately, a study of informed possibilities, meaning

that there are far more scenes that need to be discovered in order for a definitive history of antebellum black and working-class readers to be written. While in these chapters I show how *some* of these readers practiced underground literacy, the intimidating task of finding more evidence, particularly regarding slave and immigrant literacy, remains. Those who continue research in these areas are met with the challenge of the archives themselves, as they have most often been organized by privileged white men with privileged white men as their primary subjects. Yet, as Toni Morrison has suggested, “hidden” does not equal non-existent. My hope is that this dissertation can allow more evidence of underground literacy to be discovered, further documenting the surprising and pervasive participation of marginalized readers in antebellum literary culture.

Chapter 1

“Stolen” Texts, Stolen Moments: Reprinting and the Practice of Underground Literacy

I sat at work till eight, and sometimes nine, at night; and, then, either read, or walked about our little room and committed ‘Hamlet’ to memory, or the rhymes of some modern poet, until compelled to go to bed from sheer exhaustion—for it must be remembered that I was repeating something audibly, as I sat at work, the greater part of the day—either declensions and conjugations, or rules of syntax, or propositions of Euclid, or the ‘Paradise Lost’.

Thomas Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper, Written by Himself*

The printed regulations forbade us to bring books into the mill, so I made my window-seat into a small library of poetry, pasting its side all over with newspaper clippings. In those days we had only the weekly papers, and they had always a “poet’s corner,” where standard writers were well represented, with anonymous ones, also...I chose my verses for their sentiment, and because I wanted to commit them to memory.

Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood, Outlined from Memory*

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late...Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled ‘The Columbian Orator.’ Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book...These [speeches by Richard Sheridan and Arthur O’Connor] were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest.

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*

How did individuals without social privilege practice literacy—an activity imbued with both cultural and economic capital—in antebellum America and early Victorian Britain? This question is addressed with surprising similarity in autobiographies by Thomas Cooper, a shoemaker, Chartist poet, and political organizer; Lucy Larcom, a mill girl, poet, and teacher; and Frederick Douglass, a former slave, abolitionist orator, and journalist. Depicting their lives as laborers in the 1830s and ‘40s, when each had little time or money to call their own, Cooper, Larcom, and Douglass portray themselves as untiring autodidacts who defiantly practice literacy despite being metaphorically, and in Douglass’s case literally, enslaved by their work. In the excerpts quoted above, the

autobiographers represent reading as a struggle and a pleasure. Literacy was a struggle because of long working hours, hard labor, and surveillance by their superiors, who placed limitations on what, where, and when they could read, or if they could read at all. Yet literacy was also a pleasure because Cooper, Larcom, and Douglass each managed to creatively circumvent restrictions on their literacy by reciting Hamlet from memory, cutting and pasting newspaper poetry onto machinery, and “[getting] hold of” a book of radical oratory, respectively. By representing themselves reading *belles lettres*, a seemingly privileged activity, the autobiographers portray themselves as intelligent social agents *despite* their low social positions, employing literacy to politicize their self-representations. Yet the literacy they portray takes a distinct form *because of* their low social positions, thriving in an atmosphere of opposition, evading surveillance, and making shrewd use of encounters with popular print. The literacy described by Cooper, Larcom, and Douglass—and by other British and American laborers and former slaves—employed an infrastructure of mainstream culture, the transatlantic reprint industry, but subverted mainstream expectations of how that print would be consumed. I call these practices “underground” literacy, and my contention in this chapter and throughout my dissertation is that underground literacy was transatlantic and transracial, even while readers themselves were very much tied to specific places and group identities. Therefore, while Cooper, Larcom, and Douglass may have been grounded in politically, socially, and racially distinct groups, their representations of a defiant and at times secretive literacy practiced during the 1830s and 1840s illustrate how hierarchical social structures and a growing print trade placed British workers, American workers, and African Americans in a position to practice underground literacy.

The infrastructure of this underground literacy is the transatlantic reprint industry, and, more specifically, transatlantic practices of reprinting. Cooper's *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*, Larcom's newspaper poetry (written by "standard writers" and "anonymous ones, also"), and Douglass's *Columbian Orator* were all products of a "print revolution" in the early to mid-nineteenth century that drove down the price of print and made it more readily available to the "masses" (Larcom 176).¹ The practice of reprinting was a key aspect of this so-called revolution. The lack of a copyright agreement between Britain and America meant that printers in America could reprint titles of British origin without paying for the rights—and, though not studied as often, vice-versa. As I will discuss in detail below, the American print industry depended upon the reprinting of British texts in book, periodical, and pamphlet form. Meanwhile, in early Victorian Britain, copyright was no longer perpetual, meaning that classics such as the works of Shakespeare and Milton, as well as major titles of the previous century, could be reprinted cheaply by some of the same printers that reprinted current American titles.² While reprinting was a mainstream industry, especially in America, it always hovered on the edge of disrespectability—British publishers called American printers "pirates," even if their activities were perfectly legal—and it was always difficult for printers and booksellers to control what became of their texts. In America, texts were often reprinted several times, in multiple formats, without citing the initial publisher or even the author. As Aileen Fyfe has noted, "it was never possible to know where or when someone might

¹ The print revolution is discussed by many print historians, particularly Ian Haywood in *The Revolution in Popular Literature* (2004). However, Robert A. Gross, in "Reading for an Extensive Republic," points out that the reading revolution was, in actuality, by no means sudden or monolithic (533).

² According to John Feather, perpetual copyright, which granted authors and publishers rights to a title in perpetuity, ended in 1774 in Britain (73). For a complete discussion of British copyright, see Feather's *A History of British Publishing*.

decide to start a reprint,” making the publishing business risky (270). The uncontrollability of reprinting is related to what Frank Zboray calls the “unbounded, undisciplined” nature of print in antebellum America (142): on the shelves of bookstores and libraries, books were often wildly uncategorized, leading readers to become what Larcom referred to as “omnivorous,” consuming books of various origins and genres at whim (105).

This inability to control the surge of print that was flooding America and Britain from the 1830s through the 1850s, while challenging for publishers, created an ideal environment for underground literacy. Print, in various forms and of sometimes indeterminate origin, was everywhere, and even when still too expensive (for some white workers and free blacks) or expressly forbidden (for most slaves), books and newspapers could find their way into the possession of those who were supposed to be denied print’s power. The practice of reprinting also extended this boundlessness to interpretation: mainstream texts, when reprinted in radical newspapers, could take on politicized meanings never intended by the author or initial publisher. Underground literacy, as I will show, came to depend upon the mainstream practice of reprinting, but also subverted that practice through the assimilation of reprinted *belles lettres* into disparate personal and political frameworks.

The notion that African Americans, American workers, and British workers participated in the supposedly bourgeois-centered literary culture of the antebellum and early Victorian periods, reading many of the same texts as their social superiors and writing in these same literary traditions, has either been ignored or dismissed by many scholars for several reasons. Until recently, assumptions about the illiteracy of white

workers and African Americans during this time period went unchallenged. Meanwhile, the rise of the American novel and consolidation of the middle class in the wake of capitalist industrial expansion have focused much scholarly attention on the professionalization of authorship and middle-class literacy.³ In addition, national paradigms of literary history have caused much dialogue between British and American authors, publishers, and readers to go unnoticed. Recently, however, book historians have challenged these obstacles to discovering a transatlantic underground literacy by crossing disciplinary and national lines, and have been willing to engage in the difficult archival research necessary to provide historically viable documentation for the reading practices of those history has all but erased. Richard Altick, Jonathan Rose, Janet Duitsman Cornelius, and Elizabeth McHenry, among others, have pioneered this work, making remarkable discoveries of literary practices among British workers and African Americans that have been hidden in the archives.⁴ Similarly, book historians such as Meredith McGill, Michael Winship, James Raven, and Aileen Fyfe have brought the transatlantic book trade and the practice of reprinting in particular to the forefront of antebellum literary history, asserting that reprinting should not be dismissed as a lesser form of literary practice, but instead seen as a distinct “culture,” according to McGill.⁵

³ As I discuss in the introduction, William Charvat and other book historians of the twentieth century have focused on American authorship as a central paradigm of the nineteenth-century print trade. Others Americanists such as Nina Baym and Cathy Davidson, while extending their focus to readership and even, in Baym’s case, to the reception of British texts, are mainly interested in middle-class responses to the novel. See Baym’s *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (1984) and Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986).

⁴ See my discussion of Rose’s *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001) and McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002) in the introduction. See also Altick’s *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (1957) and Cornelius’s “*When I Can Read My Title Clear*”: *Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (1991).

⁵ Winship and McGill approach reprinting from an American perspective; I discuss Winship and McGill in the introduction and later in this chapter. Raven and Fyfe approach reprinting from a British and transatlantic perspective; see Raven’s *London Booksellers and American Customers: Transatlantic*

The transatlantic and assimilative nature of working-class and African-American literacy during this period has been dismissed for more complex reasons. The idea that a dominated social or racial group participates in the dominant culture while also subverting that culture has been fraught with anxiety for many working-class and African American scholars of the late twentieth century. In the wake of labor unions and civil rights, early efforts at class and race consciousness seem tentative and conservative, particularly when workers and blacks appeared to mimic the language and values of the dominant culture in print. This has caused much of the print produced by African Americans and white American workers in the antebellum era to be dismissed as ideologically “middle class” instead of subversive or radical.⁶

The practice of reprinting, I argue, exposes this false binary: by reading texts from mainstream print culture and reconfiguring them to fit a different material and ideological context, white workers and African Americans were engaging in the process of assimilation which, according to Michel de Certeau, is not merely passive acquiescence to dominant ideology, but instead can be a disruptive and creative act.⁷ Underground literacy, as it was practiced by white workers and African Americans, reveals a resistance to the power structure of dominant society while upholding mainstream faith in the power of print to change that society. Engaging in mainstream print culture, practitioners of underground literacy also undermine the white, capitalistic loyalties of the mainstream

Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748-1811 (2002) as well as his collection, co-edited with Leslie Howsam, *Books between Europe and the Americas: Connections and Communities, 1620-1860* (2011); see also Fyfe's *Steam-Powered Knowledge: William Chambers and the Business of Publishing, 1820-1860* (2012) as well as her article “Business and Reading across the Atlantic: W & R Chambers and the United States Market, 1840-60” in Raven and Howsam's collection.

⁶ See my discussion of reading and power in the introduction.

⁷ De Certeau views reading and other consumer activities as active, not passive. For more about assimilation, see my discussion of de Certeau in the introduction and his *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).

print industry by employing it to represent themselves as literate citizens.⁸ Reading and writing *belles lettres* in the antebellum era, as I will show in this and the following chapters, is not an essentially middle-class act because of reprinting and its resistance to control.

This dissertation is the study of how African American and white working-class practitioners of transatlantic underground literacy employed the reprint industry to subvert and challenge the power structures of antebellum America and early Victorian Britain through self-representation. As the first part of that study, this chapter provides a foundation for my discussion of specific scenes of reading in subsequent chapters by establishing how the development of reprinting as a transatlantic mainstream industry influenced the formation and practices of underground literacy. To do this, the chapter traces the evolution of reprinting from a fringe practice among radical printers in the late eighteenth century to its emergence as a mainstream industry in the antebellum era, thanks to the absence of a copyright agreement between Britain and America. I highlight the aspects of this evolution that became most influential to practices of underground literacy, particularly the inability of governments, authors, or publishers to control how, where, and when texts were reprinted, allowing African American and white working-class readers to take control of the context and messages of reprinted texts. Finally, I outline the general characteristics of underground literacy that I discuss specifically in later chapters, establishing how the reprint industry shaped but was also subverted by these reading practices. Ultimately, I suggest that the influence of reprinting on the

⁸ As a major industry in America and Britain, the transatlantic reprint industry profited from laissez-faire economics in both countries; in America, as I discuss below, the reprint industry's dependence upon a lack of copyright meant that it found unlikely allies in defenders of states' rights, who also supported slavery. For a discussion of this political morass, see McGill, chapters 1 & 2.

practice of underground literacy is an act of politicized assimilation rather than social control, which I will illustrate in greater depth in the following chapters.

The Reprint Industry: Print for the Few and the Many

For quite some time, literary scholars have attempted to ignore, deny, or otherwise discount the widespread practice of reprinting British and other European texts in antebellum America. They did so, despite the fact that reprinted texts dominated the lists of even major northeastern publishers such as Ticknor & Fields and the Harper Brothers, because the practice of reprinting seemed inauthentic, and, in a literary sense, un-American.⁹ How can a literary scholar insist upon the importance and originality of American authors in a literary marketplace that was controlled by classic and new British titles? It seemed, until recently, that one could not, and so scholarship highlighting reprint publishing and its cultural implications was virtually non-existent. Instead, author-focused scholarship highlighted the influence of British authors upon now-canonized American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and, more recently, Emily Dickinson.¹⁰ Little attention was paid to *how* these authors were exposed to British texts. In what formats did Emerson read Wordsworth? Did he purchase an imported collection, an edition printed in England but bound in America, a reprinted collected works? Or did he come across stray reprinted poems in national or local newspapers? Americans—those history now considers important, like Emerson, and

⁹ According to Charles A. Madison, 90% of the titles on the Harpers' list were European in origin in the 1840s (23). In 1853, reprints still held a majority, albeit smaller (26). Because of the enormity of the reprint market, Charvat considered it pernicious to the development of a market for American literature. See his *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (1959).

¹⁰ Robert Weisbuch, in *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (1986), documents British literary influence on major writers of the American Renaissance while also arguing that American writers took a "defensive position" toward British authors they viewed as competitors in the literary marketplace (xii). More recently, Dickinson scholars such as Cristanne Miller have shown that Dickinson's poetry was influenced by popular American and British authors as well as the practices of reprinting. See Miller's *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* (2012).

those who were never visible beyond their own obscure communities—could read British texts in any of these forms and could find them within the same libraries or book stores. Yet even recently, reading historians have continued to discount the importance of reprinting to antebellum American literacy, seeing it only as a cheap (and somewhat embarrassing) means of filling space in newspapers, not as an important cultural practice.¹¹

The widespread availability of reprints and their formats is crucially important to the study of nineteenth-century literary practice because this availability disrupts the idea that reading—and even writing and publishing—were essentially genteel or privileged activities in this era. Privileged white men like Emerson certainly had the broadest access to print, the means to purchase the print they consumed, and the leisure time to practice literacy at a high level, but the very titles that influenced Emerson’s nascent American Romanticism could also be found in cheap circulating libraries, mechanics’ libraries, African-American reading rooms, and the literary columns of weekly papers of various political persuasions across the country. For example, the Romantic poets and biographies of their lives were widely read and reprinted in Britain and America. Byron’s poetry, in particular, provides an excellent example of how British literary texts could be accessed by a large demographic. In Massachusetts, privileged readers could find a two-volume edition of *Don Juan* (Philadelphia 1823), a two-volume edition of Byron’s *Collected Poems* (Boston 1814), and a one-volume edition of Byron’s *Collected Plays* (Boston 1822) at the Worcester Athenaeum, or a two-volume edition of Byron’s *Childe*

¹¹ David M. Stewart, for example, when discussing the reading habits of working-class white men in his 2011 study, says that reprinting was “rationalized” because it “filled pages and met deadlines” (4).

Harold at the Boston Public Library.¹² Meanwhile, any resident of Lowell, Massachusetts could borrow Byron's *Poetical Works* (New York 1848) from the Lowell City Library, while members (and their families and friends) of the Middlesex Mechanics Association in Lowell could borrow the *Collected Works of Lord Byron*, and textile workers at Pacific Mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts could find Byron's poetry in an anthology of British poets (Figure 1.1).¹³ Byron's poems also appeared in elite British periodicals as well as working-class weekly newspapers in Britain and America. Reprinting fostered the wide circulation and appeal of Byron's poetry, among other texts, as it allowed for the uncontrolled reproduction of British and other European texts in multiple formats throughout the United States. This process, as evidence from multiple library catalogs illustrates, meant that wealthy, middle-class, and working-class people could all have access to the same authors, albeit in different formats.

¹² I include as much information about each title as the catalog provides. Information from the *Worcester County Athenaeum Records, 1830-1848* and *Catalogue of Books in the Boston Library, June 1830*. Both catalogs are held at the American Antiquarian Society.

¹³ *Catalogue of the City Library, Lowell, Mass. Established May 20, 1844*. Lowell: Stone & Huse, 1861; *Catalogue of the Library of the Middlesex Mechanic Association, at Lowell, Mass.* Lowell: S.J. Varney, 1853; *Catalogue of the Pacific Mills Library, Lawrence, Mass. Opened August 21, 1854*. Boston: Printed by Damrell and Moore, 1855. Middlesex Mechanics's catalog, American Textile History Museum; all other catalogs, the American Antiquarian Society. These reprints of Byron's poetry traveled south, too, appearing in plantation libraries in North Carolina, as I discuss in chapter 3.

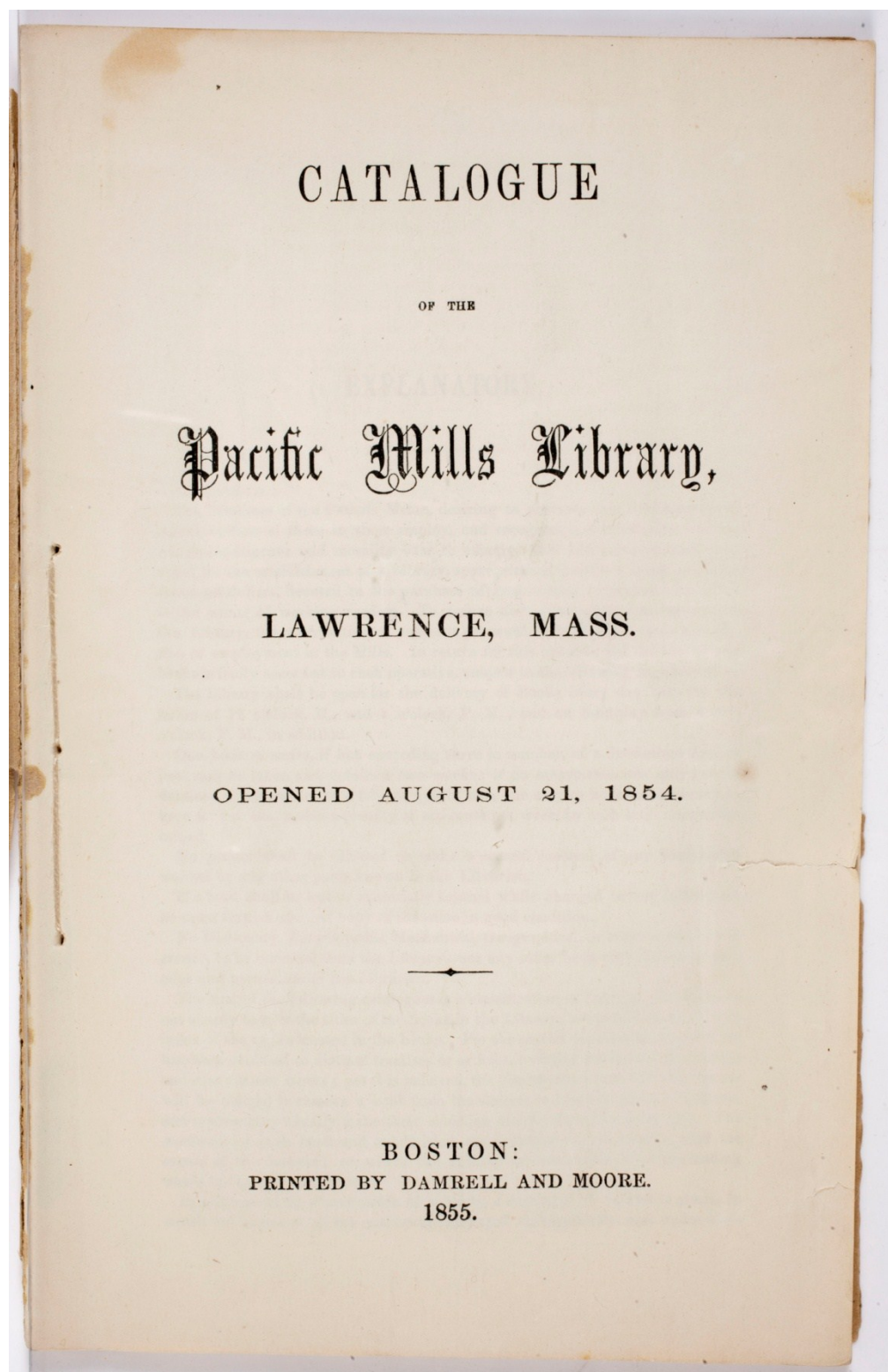


Figure 1.1 *Catalogue of the Pacific Mills Library*. Title Page. 1855. American Antiquarian Society.

As McGill has asserted, reprinting was such a widespread practice that it became a “cultural norm”—a specific way of producing and consuming texts in antebellum America (*American Literature* 3). This culture, with its “mass-cultural circulation of high-cultural texts,” in addition to the “transnational status” of reprinted texts, has “confound[ed] our critical taxonomies” that value national and social boundaries (3). While McGill’s own study of reprint culture continues to respect some of these boundaries by focusing on major authors and specifically American reprinting, she suggests that the implications of reprinting extend beyond them.¹⁴ With these implications in mind, I argue that the transatlantic culture of reprinting played a vital role in the literary culture of British workers while it was also defining the literary culture of white American workers and African Americans. Many of the same titles that were being reprinted in America were also being reprinted in cheap editions in Britain, and many American texts—from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to poems by William Cullen Bryant—were being reprinted in cheap book and newspaper formats, as well.¹⁵ Therefore, the practice of reprinting was a transatlantic phenomenon that challenges national and social boundaries—those imposed at the time, as well as those imposed by scholars. This allowed for the formation of shared underground reading strategies among African Americans and white workers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Revolutionary Origins of Transatlantic Reprinting

¹⁴ See McGill’s introduction to *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*.

¹⁵ Multiple reprinted editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were brought out in Britain, many of them “cheap” editions. See Margaret Holbrook Hildreth’s *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Bibliography* (1976) for specific editions. Advertisements in British books and newspapers for Douglass’s *Narrative* reveal that it was often reprinted cheaply for a specifically working-class readership. For instance, London publishers Partridge & Oakey advertised a shilling edition of the *Narrative* in an edition of Edward Paxton Hood’s *The Literature of Labor and Self-Education* (1851). Reprint Publishers Clarke & Co. advertised a cheap edition of anti-slavery poems that included Bryant and other American poets.

Reprinting, as a practice and as a trade, was inextricable from the politics of the British Empire in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world, linking the materiality of print to the economics of empire and, often, the politics of revolution. The origins of the flourishing, nationalized reprint industry of the antebellum period can be found in the printing practices of colonial Irish and American printers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While London was the central hub of the transatlantic print trade during this period, printers in Ireland (mainly Dublin and Belfast) and America (mainly Philadelphia) began to profit from the lack of copyright law between Ireland, Britain, and America by reprinting titles originally published in London. Called “pirates” by irate London publishers, who considered themselves gentlemanly tradesmen, reprinters in Ireland and America were violating only an unwritten “book-trade convention” and not the law (Sher 21). In fact, London printers’ anger toward their colonial counterparts came from the fact that reprinters were legally stealing their business (O’Connor 188). Perhaps some of this ire can also be attributed to the radical politics of many reprinters, who supported Irish and American freedom from British rule even while profiting from British-authored texts. At the same time, a class of reprint publishers arose in England and Scotland during the late eighteenth century, as well, after copyright was limited, making it possible for them to cheaply reprint British classics along with foreign titles. Therefore, in Britain, Ireland, and America, many of the same titles were being reprinted in cheap editions whose low price made them available to the middle and, increasingly, the working classes.

Networks of print developed between reprinters in Ireland and America, particularly as a growing number of post-Revolutionary reprint publishers emigrated

from Ireland to Philadelphia to escape “political turmoil” (Sher 22). Richard Sher contends that Irish reprinters who set up shop in America, like Robert Bell and Matthew Carey, “show[ed] the American trade how to act like their counterparts in Ireland” but also gave American reprinting a democratic philosophical basis, as reprinting was a way of “freely disseminating knowledge” (21).¹⁶ They maintained connections with colleagues in Ireland, which caused Irish reprints of British texts to surpass British editions in the post-Revolutionary American import market (Sher 22). At the same time, American texts, particularly those relating to the “American conflict,” were in high demand in Ireland, bringing about what Michael O’Connor calls “linked print communities” (192). Not only did Irish and American reprinters import each others’ books, but they also reprinted editions based on those they imported, illustrating the “boundless” nature of the transatlantic reprint trade (201). After Ireland became part of Britain in 1801, making British copyright laws applicable there, the reprinting of copyrighted British texts shifted to America, where it was still legal and would remain so until the end of the nineteenth century. Irish printers and political refugees like Carey and Bell dominated American printing and bookselling in Philadelphia in the early republic, making reprinting, not importing, the main source of British titles in the marketplace, and causing the practice of reprinting to proliferate and ultimately define American publishing before the Civil War.

Reprinting in late eighteenth-century Ireland and the early American republic was an overtly democratic activity, with Irish nationalists and American Painite revolutionaries controlling the trade from both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, the best way to illustrate the politicized nature of early reprinting and the democratization of literacy

¹⁶ See Robert Bell’s “Address to Subscribers, 1770” (qtd. in Sher 21).

that reprinters purposefully brought about is to examine the reprinting of Tom Paine's major texts—*Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*—in America, Ireland, and Britain. As Trish Loughran has pointed out, the widespread reprinting and circulation throughout the American colonies of Paine's *Common Sense* in 1776 has taken on mythic proportions—much like the work itself. Yet the myth “has its basis in fact”: First printed by Bell, the expatriate Irish reprinter, in Philadelphia, *Common Sense* was “reprinted an unusual number of times and had a tremendous influence in...the colonies and Europe” (40). In the colonies alone, twenty-five editions appeared within a short time of its initial publication, but this does not entirely explain how *Common Sense* was disseminated to Americans (40). It was originally published as a pamphlet, but local printers in most of the thirteen colonies reprinted it in other formats by (47). Due to the difficulty of procuring printing supplies in New England, for example, a printer in Hartford, Connecticut serialized the text in his newspaper instead of printing it as a pamphlet. Similarly, another printer in Newport, Rhode Island produced two partial reprintings—the first included only sixteen pages, while the next included thirty-one, picking up where the first left off (49). These multiple formats meant that as *Common Sense* was reprinted, it became part of different print contexts, and therefore became almost a different text, outside of the control of its author and initial publisher.

The haphazard nature of *Common Sense*'s reprinting applied to its circulation, as well. Since the colonies lacked a central print trade at the time, the circulation of *Common Sense* was outside of any one person's control: congressmen in Philadelphia sent it back to their home districts, where Loughran states that “the book followed an obvious path from post rider to private recipient, making the expected interim stop in the

hands of the local printer,” who “commandeered a copy for himself...before sending it on to its rightful owner” (53). Local printers then brought out their own reprints of the text. As John Keane has asserted, the rapid, informal dissemination of *Common Sense* throughout the colonies, and its appearance in various formats, meant that Americans of “all walks of life,” including the “literate and nonliterate” were exposed to Paine’s work (112). Reportedly, because the text was written in the “vernacular language of the public house and market square,” it was often read aloud in taverns and other local establishments, where it was also loudly discussed and debated, making it known to anyone there able to listen—including slaves owned by the tavern keeper or its patrons (Brown 65). According to Richard D. Brown, the extensive readership of *Common Sense* showed that “the audience for political writing burst traditional social boundaries” and anticipated a time when “the common folk would...be reading many of the same literary, historical, and political texts that circulated among the elite and emulating genteel rhetoric,” a prospect that for some elites—even in Revolutionary America—posed a threat to “social stability” (67). The haphazard means of reprinting and circulating *Common Sense* in colonial America would become the entrenched practice of the antebellum reprint industry, allowing for a similarly democratic readership of *belles lettres* in the coming years.

The transatlantic connections between American, Irish, and British reprinters, particularly in the trade in radical texts, ensured that *Common Sense* soon made appearances in Britain and Ireland, as well (Keane 110). Yet it was Paine’s next work, *Rights of Man*, that had the most widespread influence in England, Scotland, and Ireland. A critique of European hierarchies and institutions written in England on the eve of the

French Revolution, *Rights of Man* had a similar print history in Britain and Ireland that *Common Sense* had in America. Published despite the close scrutiny of the British government—London publisher Joseph Johnson, “fearing the book police,” held back his edition of the text—*Rights of Man* became an international sensation (307). Another London publisher, J.S. Jordan, brought out a three-shilling edition in March, 1791, and went through six editions by May (307); translations soon after appeared in France, Holland, and Germany (305). Cheaper editions also began appearing, including one by the radical London Corresponding Society, ensuring that “the effects of *Rights of Man* began to be felt at the grassroots level,” making Paine’s name “identical with the agitation” for the extension of democracy in Britain that would later become Chartism, the working-class political movement that employed print and literacy as its primary organizing tool (331).¹⁷ In fact, according to E.P. Thompson, Paine’s texts would continue to be influential to working-class societies in the 1830s and ‘40s, when copies were still printed, sold, and read “on the sly” (498).

Just as the reprinting of *Common Sense* surpassed the control of Paine and Bell in America, multiple reprintings of *Rights of Man* make reported publication numbers unreliable in Britain, as the exact number of “abridged and unabridged editions issued by local clubs and societies” is unknown (Keane 333). Also, just as *Common Sense*, because of its multiple reprintings, had found an audience among common people, including the illiterate, *Rights of Man* was “read aloud and talked about to the illiterate on an unheard-

¹⁷ The London Corresponding Society was a radical democratic organization that focused on achieving working-class enfranchisement through the power of print. Leaders of the LCS also became leaders of the Chartist Movement, which focused on passing the People’s Charter in parliament, giving the vote to working-class men. For more on the formation of the LCS, other working-class societies throughout Britain, and the influence of Paine’s *Rights of Man*, see E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*, chapter five, “Planting the Liberty Tree.”

of scale” (308). This was the case in Sheffield, England, later a hub of Chartist agitation, where 2,500 mechanics joined a reform society that read and debated Paine’s text and were thus the focus of police action, including the “closing down of public places where commoners met” to discuss the text and harassing and sometimes arresting booksellers who stocked it (335). Similarly, in Ireland, *Rights of Man* had “the most sensational impact in the communities of Irish Catholic peasants” who “reportedly began to debate” the text in “taverns, streets, and marketplaces” (333). The democratic fervor caused by *Rights of Man* was so pervasive and threatening to the British government that Paine was forced into exile after being followed by spies, “pelted” with abuse in the press, and charged with seditious libel; he fled to France in the fall of 1792 (344). By that time, as many as 100,000 reprinted copies were sold in America, bolstered by the latter-day popularity of *Common Sense* and widespread support for the French Revolution (332).

The boundless reprinting of Paine’s *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* at the end of the eighteenth century is important to considerations of transatlantic reprinting and its implications for democratic readerships for several reasons. First, the transatlantic appeal of Paine’s radically democratic rhetoric and ideas was made possible by informal networks of print between publishers, but also by informal networks between readers, who used the mail and word of mouth to circulate Paine’s texts. Reprinting resulted from these informal networks, which in turn made Paine’s texts available to more people, including those for whom print was less accessible. Second, widespread reprinting in multiple formats led to the consumption of Paine’s texts in similar ways on both sides of the Atlantic: wealthier radicals consumed the texts in their original formats, while working people, the poor, and even the enslaved read the texts piecemeal in newspapers,

or in abridged editions, or heard them read aloud at a local tavern. The uncontrollability of reprinting meant that Paine's texts were read and discussed by those assumed to exist outside the influence of print in the late eighteenth century. At times, the radical nature of Paine's ideas made it necessary for his texts to be read in secret, particularly by those seeking social and political equality. Third, and perhaps most important, the democratic circulation of Paine's texts, in the context of the British government's attempts to silence Paine, brought about the entrenchment of the idea of the freedom of the press in America and Britain, particularly among radical political movements. Reading reprints of Paine fifty years later, Chartists in Britain, New England textile workers, and black abolitionists employed the printing press—and literacy in general—as a symbol of freedom, an idea that Paine suggested in his texts and that was enacted by their widespread circulation. Transatlantic reprinting in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century circulated not only the same texts to common people on both sides of the Atlantic, but also the same ideas: that governments should enfranchise the poor and lowly, and that democratic print and widespread literacy were the primary means of making this happen. As the print history of Paine's texts show, reprinting was a practical *and* political act in Britain, Ireland, and America that later made underground African-American and white working-class literacy possible.

Mainstream Reprinting in America: A “Trade in Texts”

While the origins of the transatlantic reprint industry were politically radical, reprinting became a mainstream industry in the early national and antebellum periods in America. While colonial America had relied upon imported British (and Irish) books to sustain its largely localized print market, a shift occurred after the Revolution,

particularly after the closing of the Irish reprint industry in 1801 and the raising of taxes on imported books in 1816 (Groves 144).¹⁸ American printers, many of them from Ireland, capitalized on the lack of copyright and improved printing technologies (also imported from England) by reprinting British and European titles instead of importing them.

The evolution of reprinting from a fringe practice into a mainstream industry relied upon American legislators' continued rejection of an international copyright agreement with Britain—a stance fraught with political tensions and ironies.¹⁹ According to McGill, the prolonged lack of international copyright legislation in America was “the product of a strong cultural emphasis on the free circulation of print that depended upon limiting authors' and publishers' property rights in texts” (“Copyright” 158).²⁰ This seemingly democratic stance, privileging readers over authors and publishers, was also strongly supported by reprint publishers, who reprinted mainly British and other foreign texts, and therefore not only benefited from but relied upon a lack of international copyright. As McGill discusses at length in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, specific copyright cases tried in the early republic repeatedly ruled against authors' rights and for reprinters' rights, using language that equated reading with printing. Making the case for common ownership of published texts in *Wheaton v. Peters* (1834), a battle over the reprinting of Supreme Court reporter Henry Wheaton's legal *Reports* by his successor, Richard Peters, victorious defense lawyer J.R. Ingersoll argued,

¹⁸ Meanwhile, the first American copyright law, passed in 1790, explicitly stated that copyright would not prohibit the printing of any text from outside of the country (McGill, “Copyright” 160).

¹⁹ According to McGill, “Between 1837 and 1854 Congress formally rejected or tabled numerous international copyright bills, denied petitions signed by Britain's and America's most prominent authors, and blocked the passage of an Anglo-American copyright treaty that had been supported by two presidents” (*American Literature* 81).

²⁰ For a timeline of how copyright legislation evolved in nineteenth-century America, see McGill's “Copyright” in *A History of the Book in America, Volume 3: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880* (2007).

“Throw [a text] out for public use, and how can you limit or define that use? How can you attach possession to it at all...? If you may read, you may print” (qtd. in *American Literature* 61). In this “landmark” case, which established “the inherent publicity of print and the political necessity of its wide dissemination,” the republican stress on the rights of readers also extended to reprint publishers, spurring the growth of the reprint industry in the antebellum era (45, 47).

While the sympathy of reprint publishers for the cause of a democratic readership appears to follow the narrative of late eighteenth century reprinting, in which reprinting was tied to radical politics, the American case against international copyright took an ironic turn. The livelihood of reprint publishers and the cause of democratic readership became connected to the cause of states’ rights and *laissez-faire* economics, creating some strange political bedfellows. American politicians who fought copyright law because they opposed “the consolidation of governmental authority”—many of them southern and pro-slavery—won “bedrock support” from “reprint publishing houses [and] trade unions ... at public meetings of interested tradesmen” (83). Reprinters, many of whom had fled the British government because of their support for the enfranchisement of British and Irish peasants, now joined forces with aristocratic southern slaveholders and their allies in Congress under the banner of small government. Economic interests—profit—thus united industries and aims that seemed fundamentally at odds: the reprint industry, dominated by working- and middle-class men, which sought to make print more widely available, thus educating those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy; and the cotton and textile industry, dominated by the American economic elite, which sought to

disenfranchise and enslave those same groups.²¹ Interestingly, the reprinters' argument against copyright appeared most often in the cheap periodicals they published, including "penny dailies...which cultivated an urban, working-class readership," exemplifying the contradictory political aims of blocking international copyright (83-4). The transformation of the reprint industry from revolutionary to mainstream in America, therefore, was fraught with political ironies. On one hand, reprinters' alliance with elite economic interests allowed the transatlantic reprint industry to grow during the antebellum era, evading governmental control and bringing British texts within reach of African Americans and white workers. On the other hand, it implicitly linked the growth of popular literacy to the legislative power of those who profited from keeping these groups from the political empowerment and social mobility that literacy could bring.

The growth of reprinting as a mainstream industry led to the slow nationalization of the print trade, as increasingly successful reprinters in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston sought to expand their markets and to compete with each other. While in the early national period, according to Loughran, there was "no 'nationalized' print public sphere" and "fragmented pieces of text circulated haphazardly and unevenly in a world still largely dominated by the limits of locale" (xix), Zboray argues that railroads and a more reliable mail system caused local print cultures to "[give] way before a deluge of rail-borne print materials from the three eastern publishing centers" in the antebellum period (xviii). Because northeastern printers were producing mainly reprints, this meant that many of the same British and European titles were being read across the nation: editions of Sir Walter Scott's novels reprinted in northern cities, for instance, could be found in

²¹ While supporters of international copyright in Congress "tended to be Whig, northern, and avowedly protectionist," the largely Democratic opposition saw a lack of copyright "as a lifting of trade restrictions that benefitted American industry" (McGill, *American Literature* 85).

southern plantation libraries and New England mechanics' libraries.²² But this does not mean that the "haphazard" and "uneven" circulation of textual fragments that Loughran identifies as part of the early national print trade disappeared. Instead, as reprints from northern publishers became more widely available, it became easier for newspaper editors and obscure local publishers to reprint the same British and European texts in various ways. Even while reprinting went mainstream in America, it maintained the boundlessness that characterized it in the late eighteenth century and, in some ways, took widely circulated texts even farther from authors' and publishers' control.

To understand how American reprinting continued to resist boundaries imposed upon it by governments, authors, and publishers, it is important to get a sense of how British texts traveled to America to be published, and how each step of this process depended upon wildly fluctuating material circumstances. As previously stated, unofficial networks between Irish and American reprinters enabled each to procure texts, but in the early national and antebellum periods, after the closing of the Irish market, American reprinters sought to establish official business relationships with British printers. Matthew Carey, already well-versed in unofficial print networks, was the first American printer to hire a British agent to procure British titles before his competition could. The agent paid British publishers for "advance sheets" of an edition, which were then sent to Carey in Philadelphia, where he reprinted them (Madison 10). Despite this advantage, Carey still had to work fast in order to control the market for a title in high demand: in one instance, he printed and distributed an edition of a British novel within 28 hours of

²² North Carolina landowner and politician John Hill Wheeler's 1850 catalog contains a six-volume *Works* of Sir Walter Scott (New York 1818) and *Beauties of the Waverly Novels* (Boston 1828). The 1840 Middlesex Mechanics' Library contains all of Scott's novels, including multiple copies of some, like one and two-volume editions of *The Abbott*.

receiving advance sheets from his agent. He wrote that he expected “pirates” (his term for American printers who had not paid for advance sheets) to reprint from his edition within 48 hours, “but we shall have complete and entire possession of every market in the Country for a short time” (qtd. in Madison 10).²³ Carey’s “official” networking with a British publisher led to the unofficial proliferation of reprints based upon Carey’s edition: in addition to Carey’s reprint of the novel, “pirated” editions also entered the literary marketplace, enlarging the potential readership of that title.

Yet the procuring of British texts became even more complicated given what Michael Winship calls “the trade in texts”: American publishers did not only purchase advance sheets, but also unbound sheets printed in Britain, changing the title page and marketing the edition as their own (“International Trade in Books” 156). In addition, these sheets, as well as others reprinted by American publishers, were sometimes auctioned to other printers, who re-packaged them yet again (Fyfe 265). In other cases, American publishers solicited stereotype plates from British publishers, such as when the Boston firm Gould, Kendall, & Lincoln purchased stereotype plates of London printer William Chamber’s *Cyclopedia of English Literature* in 1846 (264). This example provides a particularly interesting case study of reprinting, given that the *Cyclopedia* was filled with excerpts reprinted by Chambers from out-of-copyright British titles and was then reprinted from British plates in America. This rather complicated example of the trade in texts between American and British printers shows the close relationship between

²³ According to Jeffrey Groves, printers who abided by “a set of extralegal trade conventions that governed competition” over reprints, or “courtesy of the trade,” called those who did not “pirates” (140). Yet the definition of “pirate” shifted over space and time. For instance, some highly visible and profitable reprinters, like the Harpers in New York and Routledge in London, were considered pirates by their competition because they did not respect the trade courtesy. This seemed to improve instead of hurting their business.

the two and, as a result, the difficulty in deciding which texts can be considered American or British editions, blurring national print boundaries. Even printers' imprints in specific editions do not tell the entire story. What is clear from these exchanges, however, is that reprinting allowed for the proliferation of inexpensive print that was uniquely transatlantic in origin.

The relative inexpensiveness of reprinting British books corresponded to the falling price of books in the American market.²⁴ Nonetheless, books were still too expensive for many Americans to purchase on a regular basis—although many readers for whom this was true had access to public and private libraries stocked primarily with reprinted books from Philadelphia, New York, and Boston (as I discuss in more depth in later chapters). For the “lower orders” of American society, periodicals became the primary means of accessing print, as they were cheaper and easier to procure.²⁵ Yet many of the periodicals read by those on the low end of the economic spectrum were also read by the middle-class and wealthy, particularly weekly and monthly “miscellanies” that reprinted stories, poems, and nonfiction from British periodicals. Littell’s *Living Age*, published first in Philadelphia, then New York, then Boston, exemplifies how these miscellanies repackaged British texts for a broad American readership. Attempting to achieve national circulation in an increasingly sectarian nation, publisher Eliakim Littell reprinted texts from London, Edinburgh, and Dublin-based periodicals because their titles conferred authority as well as distance from antebellum American politics (McGill 24). As McGill points out, the table of contents of the *Living Age* omitted author’s names and instead listed the periodical from which each article was reprinted, such as *Blackwood’s*

²⁴ According to Zboray, most books were priced between \$.75 and \$1.25, but “novels by foreign authors” sold for as little as \$.12 (12).

²⁵ From my review of several antebellum periodicals, average annual subscriptions were \$1-3.

Magazine, *London Magazine*, *Punch*, and the *Foreign Quarterly Review* (25). Poetry received no citation of authorship or print origin at all (25). These periodicals, imbued with British cultural cache and attempting to avoid domestic politics, helped Littel develop the *Living Age* into a national magazine, as the title page of the May 11, 1844 issue attests: agents in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Albany, Cincinnati, and New Orleans sold the magazine (25). Yet Littel's political disinterestedness as editor extended only to his desire to increase circulation; despite his claims to nonpartisanship, he reprinted articles critiquing the factory system and slavery from British periodicals, using the British origin of the articles and their reform-minded sentiments as an excuse (Scholnick 285). To balance these opinions, Littel also printed a few British anti-labor and pro-slavery articles in the *Living Age*. While some genteel southern readers complained, many continued to subscribe nonetheless (290). In fact, the wide circulation of the *Living Age*, especially in the South, meant that the censorship of abolitionist texts was not absolute, giving white abolitionists, free blacks, and even slaves access to anti-slavery print. In fact, Robert Scholnick speculates that Frederick Douglass was influenced by the anti-slavery sentiment expressed in the *Living Age*, which may have contributed to his Anglophilia (292). The national circulation of miscellanies like the *Living Age* that depended upon British reprints for content expanded the readership of those reprints to people who could not afford to purchase even cheap books.

Periodical reprinting becomes more complicated considering that cheap weekly newspapers, the organs of specific political, social, economic, or ethnic groups, reprinted material from mainstream miscellanies, taking texts that were already recontextualized and placing them in yet another material and ideological context. Nationally circulated

miscellanies, in addition to major newspapers, including those imported directly from Britain, became the unofficial suppliers of content for literary columns in local weekly newspapers. In my survey of several African American and New England working-class papers, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction that appears in literary columns is often taken from national miscellanies (the title is sometimes cited). In some cases, these texts can still be directly traced, and a trail of periodical reprinting materializes. For example, in January 1833, *Fraser's Magazine*, an elite British publication, printed Byron's scandalous lampoon of stodgy poet Samuel Rogers under the title "Lord Byron's Unpublished Poem on Mr. Rogers." An explanation of the editors' disapproval of Byron and devotion to Rogers accompanies the poem, along with detailed notes that explain the poem's insults, both of which reveal the magazine's Tory sympathies. In America, the humorous poem next appears, under the title "Lord Byron and Mr. Rogers," in the April issue of the monthly miscellany *Museum of Foreign Literature and Science*, printed in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston.²⁶ In addition to reprinting the *Fraser's* article in its entirety, the *Museum* also includes columns from the London *Times* and the *Examiner* that also voice disapproval of the poem and support for Rogers (501-503).²⁷ Shortly afterward, the poem appears in the April 11, 1833 issue of the *New England Artisan*, a working-class weekly newspaper, with the title "Lord Byron's Verses on Sam Rogers, in Question and Answer," but without the Tory-leaning notes.²⁸ Instead, the poem stands alone, meant to be appreciated as mockery of an aristocratic poet by another with well-

²⁶ Eliakim Littell, along with colleagues in New York and Boston, published the *Museum* until 1844, when he sold it to begin the *Living Age* (Mott 308).

²⁷ The *Times* calls the poem "malignant and atrocious satire," an example of Byron's "mean and dirty qualities," while the *Examiner* reprints one of Rogers's poems to exemplify his superiority to Byron (*Museum*, April 1833, 501-502).

²⁸ The timeline of the poem's publication first in *Fraser's*, then in the *Museum*, then in the *Artisan*, matches the timeline of how long it would take for *Fraser's* to travel through the mail, with the *Museum* finally reaching the editors of the *Artisan* in Boston.

known radical sympathies. This process reveals how British reprints came within reach of those seemingly without means to purchase books: newspaper editors, also voracious readers, placed reprinted texts from monthly miscellanies into the overtly political context of weekly newspapers. In this way, reprints were taken from a seemingly genteel context and given different political agendas.²⁹ Therefore, while the mainstreaming of the American reprint industry in the antebellum era may have benefitted from elite political allies that blocked an international copyright agreement, the practices of reprinting made possible by a lack of copyright allowed working-class and black newspapers to use reprints toward their own aims.

British Reprinting: “Free Trade in Books”

Contrary to generalizations (mainly by Americanists), cheap print was available in Britain, too, thanks to the reprint trade that existed on the fringes of British publishing but grew in the 1840s and 1850s into a sanctioned, regulated industry. British reprint publishers were often small-scale publishers who, since the end of the eighteenth century, had relied upon previously published British and foreign titles for their living because copyright had either run out or did not yet exist for those texts. While the editions brought out by these publishers are often considered “pirated,” this is not always the case: according to British law, titles over a hundred years old were no longer protected by copyright; similarly, the lack of international copyright law meant that reprinting foreign titles was legal.³⁰ Strategies for avoiding copyright emerges from a perusal of titles

²⁹ More work like this needs to be done in order to fully grasp the material and ideological circumstances of reprinting. Tracing the origins of reprinted texts shows not only how they traveled to America, but how the context changes the message. I discuss this particular example more in chapter 4.

³⁰ No British-American copyright law existed until the 1890s. For more about British copyright, see Barnes, *Authors, Publishers, and Politicians: The Quest for an Anglo-American Copyright Agreement, 1815-1854* (1974).

brought out by the many reprint publishing firms that proliferated in the 1840s and '50s: American, French, and German texts accompany British classics like Shakespeare and Milton, as well as sensational fiction, children's literature, and travelogues by unknown authors. According to Altick, American titles in particular were crucial to the success of the reprint trade in the 1850s because American authors were more accustomed to "writ[ing] for a democratic audience" and therefore better appealed to "popular taste" (300). The reprint firm Clarke, Beeton & Co. provides a good example of this: in 1853, in addition to several editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they published Henry Ward Beecher's *The Vices; or, Lectures to Young Men*, Lyman Beecher's *Lectures on Intemperance*, and a collection entitled *Poems on Slavery* with contributions from Longfellow and Whittier.

Since British reprint publishers paid far less money to produce reprints than authorized editions, they could sell reprints at low prices and still make a profit, meaning that the consumers of reprints were usually readers who did not have access to a title when it was first published. Sometimes this was because the work was of foreign origin, but more often because the cost of new editions was prohibitive to most of the British public. Activism for wholesome reading for the lower classes resulted in these "fringe" publishers finding a market for "truly cheap wholesome literature" separate from the "sensation-mongers" on the "squalid fringes of the trade" (Altick 287). Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as a "foreign" title with a "wholesome" purpose that could be illustrated sensationally, became the ideal vehicle upon which a few of these publishers built their businesses.

The reprint industry in Britain was connected to the reprint industry in America, but differed from it in a few significant and sometimes ironic ways. While most cheap print available in antebellum America was reprinted from British texts, many cheap titles in Britain were reprinted from American texts. British reprinters, then, benefitted from the American Congress's refusal to pass a copyright treaty with Britain. As previously discussed, Congress and the Supreme Court saw American readers and publishers to be in greater need of protection than American authors, who sold well in Britain but saw little to no profits from those sales (McGill, *American Literature* 84). Ironically, then, while American authors may have been better at writing for a "democratic audience" than their British counterparts, American titles found more diverse audiences in Britain. Such was the case with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was reprinted by nearly every reprint publisher in Britain in various editions and reportedly sold 1.5 million copies there—500,000 more than in America (Gutjahr 78). Therefore, according to Altick, cheap reprints had "expansive influence" upon working class readers largely because of the appeal of American titles (300).

Like American anti-copyright activists, many of whom were publishers, British reprint publishers portrayed themselves as heralds of democracy making print available to the masses. Also like American reprinters, their stance became politically complicated, as their success was based upon the *laissez-faire* economics of the mid-nineteenth century that also promoted wage and chattel slavery, even as they printed politically radical texts. In the 1850s in particular, the publishing industry in Britain was "wholly uncontrolled" and "open to innovation and enterprise," following the general economic trend of the 1840s under the rule of a "minimalist state" (Feather 83; 101). Significantly, the

developments in the publishing industry that brought about free trade in general and a successful reprint trade in particular occurred while an American copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was reputedly brought smuggled into Britain in the summer of 1852 (Fisch, "Uncle Tom" 96). The Booksellers Association, previously administered by established publishers and booksellers in an attempt to control underselling and pirating, dissolved, "inaugurating a period of unrestricted competition in the book trade" (Feather 101). For publishers and booksellers, this led to a period of intense competition and endless search for profit that allowed a large number of small reprint firms to flourish by reprinting wildly popular texts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (102-103). Ironically, the proliferation of cheap print that allowed the British working classes access to print can be attributed to the same economic circumstances that drove down their wages.

Unlike their American counterparts, British reprinters, also called "undersellers," were considered lower-class and had little power in the British publishing industry until one of them, John Chapman, challenged the genteel Bookseller's Association's discrimination against reprinters. Under the rule of the Booksellers' Association, the oldest and most prestigious publishers and booksellers were considered "respectable" and regarded reprint publishers like Chapman as "solitary upstarts" who "endeavor[ed] to filch away the customers from old established houses, and thus to carve out for themselves a short road to opulence" (Barnes, *Authors* 328; *Free Trade* 42). Most reprint publishers, or "undersellers," were younger men with newer firms who tended to make riskier business moves. In the spring of 1852, Chapman instigated the "bookselling controversy," ending the Booksellers' Association's market control (Barnes, *Free Trade* 23). Primarily a "publisher and importer of American books," Chapman was also known

to export British books—those brought out by the firms in the Booksellers’ Association and sold wholesale—to America, where they were reprinted (24). The Association, because of Chapman’s participation in “piracy,” threatened to cut off his supply of British books; in response, he “launched an attack” on the Association, challenging their “jurisdiction over foreign books” (24). He was expelled from the Association, along with other reprint publishers who supported him, but made the matter public in May of 1852 (24). Prominent authors, including Dickens, became sympathetic to British reprinters, and the Association’s restrictions became a legal matter (25). Chapman employed democratic rhetoric to appeal to the public for support in the *London Times*: “We leave it to the public to determine whether its own vital interests in literature...shall be subject to the stifling control of a ‘select’ number of monopolists, in the much-abused name of ‘respectability’” (qtd. in *Free Trade* 93). By doing so, Chapman appeals to the democratic sensibilities of working-class readers, whose literacy he and other reprinters could profit from in a free print market. The arbitrators of the case ruled in favor of Chapman, causing the Association to become unpopular and ultimately to disband by the summer of 1852, when “all restrictions ceased,” making reprinting a legitimate part of the book trade in Britain and giving American titles prominence on reprinters’ lists.

As part of the struggle to lower the price of reprints further and beat the suddenly fierce competition, publishers used the cheaper paper and binding that technology made available, creating editions that the lower-middle and working classes could ostensibly afford.³¹ The “cheapness” of their books became an advertising tool for reprinters, who

³¹ At the end of the eighteenth century, paper-making machines were put into use; in the nineteenth century, “Fourdrinier Machines” revolutionized papermaking, making paper “plentiful and cheap” (Feather 88). Cloth binding began to replace leather in the early nineteenth century, making books cheaper even though binding “remained a hand craft” until the end of the nineteenth century (91).

produced “penny editions,” “railway editions,” “yellowbacks,” and “people’s editions”; many marketed individual titles as part of “library” series, alternately called “railway libraries,” “cheap series,” or “popular series” (Barnes, *Authors* 154). Murray, for instance, called his series the “Family Library,” appealing to the desire for middle-class morality, while Clarke, Beeton & Co. simply called their series “Readable Books,” with the accompanying phrase, “Forming a Library, suited as regards Price to the Purse, and as regards Portability to the Pocket” (Figure 1.2). These series were obviously aimed at readers who did not have an extensive library—private or circulating—at their disposal and considered reading a means of upward mobility as well as pleasure. Often printed in octavo editions of 5,000-6,000 that sold for about a shilling each, cheap books began dominating the publishing industry in the 1850s (Barnes, *Free Trade* 110; *Authors* 154). Half of the books on the market in 1852 were priced at 10s. or less; many larger volumes were issued in “penny parts,” priced at 1s. each (*Free Trade* 110; 112). These cheap series were sometimes reprinted in America, and the idea of the cheap library was copied by major reprinters like the Harpers (Madison 22).³²

³² Harpers’ Family Library, for instance, consisted of 187 volumes of primarily British texts (Madison 22).

Published Monthly,

READABLE BOOKS,

One Shilling each Ornamental Boards, or One Shilling and Sixpence
handsomely bound in Cloth,

Forming a Library, suited as regards Price to the Purse, and as regards
Portability to the Pocket

THE CAVALIERS OF ENGLAND. By H. W.
HERBERT. Splendidly Illustrated.

TALES OF MYSTERY, IMAGINATION, AND
HUMOUR, AND POEMS. Second Series. Illustrated with Sixteen
Engravings. By EDGAR ALLAN POE.

REVERIES OF A BACHELOR. By I. K. MARVEL.
There are Twelve beautiful Illustrations to this Volume.

PICTURES OF EUROPEAN CAPITALS. By W.
WARE and Others. Containing Ten superb page Engravings of various
Capitals, &c., of Europe.

WELLINGTON: THE STORY OF HIS LIFE,
HIS BATTLES, AND POLITICAL CAREER; AND A POEM ON
THE FUNERAL, By Sir FRANCIS HASTINGS DOYLE, BART.; and the
"Death March of Wellington," by W. C. Bennett; to which is added
AN ELABORATE ACCOUNT OF THE LYING-IN-STATE AND
THE FUNERAL. Illustrated with Splendid Engravings.

THE OLD GUARD OF NAPOLEON. By J. T.
HEADLEY. Illustrated with Sixteen spirited Engravings of the most
stirring Events in its History.

NILE NOTES OF A "HOWADJI;" or, THE
AMERICAN IN EGYPT. By G. W. CURTIS. Embellished with
Thirty Engravings.

THE LETTERS OF PETER PLYMLEY, ESSAYS
AND SPEECHES. By the Rev. SYDNEY SMITH. Illustrated with
page Engravings.

PHILOSOPHERS AND ACTRESSES; or, Scenes,
Vivid and Picturesque, from the Hundred and One Dramas of Art and
Passion. Now first Translated from the French of ARSENE HOUSSAYE.
Illustrated with Thirty-six Engravings.

TALES OF MYSTERY, IMAGINATION, AND
HUMOUR, AND POEMS. First Series. Illustrated with Thirty
Engravings. By EDGAR ALLAN POE.

CLARKE, BEETON, & Co., FOREIGN BOOKSELLERS, 148, FLEET-STREET.

Figure 1.2 "Readable Books." Clarke, Beeton & Co. Advertisement.
Frontmatter in *Parisian Sights and French Principles: Seen Through American
Spectacles* by James Jackson Jarves. London: Clarke, Beeton & Co., 1853.
Google Books. Web. 10 March 2013.

As the British reprint industry expanded in the 1840s and '50s, reprints became important to British newspapers, as well. Similar to the way American weekly newspapers reprinted texts from British books and periodicals, British newspapers edited and published by the working classes reprinted American texts within a British political context. The *Northern Star*, discussed further in chapter 2, reveals how reprinting in British newspapers mirrored that of American newspapers. During the 1840s, the paper reprinted out-of-copyright British authors, poems from mainstream British papers, and American poets (Murphy 126).³³ Other working-class newspapers reprinted excerpts from novels, sometimes providing politicized commentary on how to read them, as I discuss in chapter 2. Like American periodicals, British newspapers allowed reprinted texts to reach a wider readership and to be placed in diverse political contexts, allowing working-class editors and readers to subvert the mainstream values and political associations of the reprint industry.

The practices of reprinting in America and Britain between 1830 and 1860 illustrate the reciprocity between the two nations' print trades, showing that they are even more interconnected than many scholars have recognized. More importantly, this interconnectedness extends across not only the boundaries of nation, but also of race and class: the mainstream reprint industry, and the practices it codified, extended to radical print communities in Britain and America, where reprinting became an ideological and practical means of extending literacy and radical consciousness. Texts and, more importantly, varied interpretations of them, became available to more people because reprinting was impossible to control, and because the legal and economic environments in Britain and America in the 1830s, '40s and '50s allowed reprinting to proliferate. As a

³³ See the *Northern Star* 5 July 1840 and 5 July 1845.

result, reprinting returned, in some ways, to its revolutionary, underground origins of the 1790s, becoming the main source of literacy for those to whom literacy was contested and even forbidden. What had become mainstream practices of reprinting—printing texts, without permission, in multiple forms and contexts—allowed African-American and working-class readers to develop strategies of underground reading that relied upon the increased availability of reprinted texts in the antebellum era, but also subverted dominant messages of inequality. The boundless, rogue nature of reprinting could not be controlled by the white, aristocratic power structures that sought to control the labor, literacy, and social mobility of African Americans and white workers; therefore, these groups were able to practice underground literacy within the structures of power that defined their lives.

Reprinting and Strategies of Underground Literacy

The term “underground” is often used to describe organizations and networks that defy the rules and values of mainstream culture and therefore must operate, to a certain degree, in secret. The term implies, in the nineteenth century, a component of illegality, and, as a result, a degree of danger. In the antebellum era, of course, the network of information and escape routes that came to be called the Underground Railroad has become the definitive underground organization. Still mysterious to historians, the Underground Railroad was a network of people and places who “conducted” runaway slaves to the North, Canada, and sometimes England.³⁴ A surprisingly disparate variety of people were involved—slaves, free blacks, seamen, white farmers, railroad and shipping

³⁴ According to Virginia Buckmaster, “the system of help, the illegal activities, the journeys in the dead of night” predated railroad technology; the term “underground railroad” came into use in the 1830s (59). Two quotes reveal why “underground” was used as a descriptor. A slave master who could not locate his escaped slave reportedly remarked, “He must have gone on an underground road” (59); a runaway slave called the escape process “go[ing] down into the ground among the spooks” (110).

workers—and an ingenious variety of hidden spaces, called “stations,” were used to hide runaways. Yet only part of the voyage of runaway slaves to freedom took place in secret; often, for at least part of the journey, runaway slaves were hidden in plain sight, making use of the same travel routes and methods of communication that whites used.³⁵ As Kate Clifford Larson has observed in her study of conductor Harriet Tubman’s routes, communication networks were often “derived from the social and economic relationships fostered” by slave owners and “the work assignments distributed to the owner’s bondsmen and women” (66). Nonetheless, whites were “woefully ignorant of the black inter- and intraregional networks that often paralleled the white networks of trade, travel, and communication” (67). Similarly, runaway slaves were disguised and traveled on railways and steamboats “openly in their best clothes, on tickets bought without dissimulation” (Buckmaster 198). Mainstream print was also employed in the Underground Railroad: conductors printed notices in newspapers that slaves had already escaped while they waited in hiding nearby (111). By surveying what historians do know about the workings of the Underground Railroad, it becomes clear that only part of it was “underground”; much of it depended upon mainstream culture even while it subverted the hierarchies and values of that culture. To be called “underground,” based on this model, is not to be blatantly countercultural, but to at times mimic the dominant culture and employ its conventions as a means of defiance.

The Underground Railroad and its operations become an analogy—and, as I suggest in chapter 3, an actual conduit—for what I call underground literacy. In reaction to social and economic circumstances that made the practice of literacy difficult and, for

³⁵ Buckmaster provides several examples of how the Underground Railroad operated above ground in *Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement* (1966).

some, dangerous, African Americans and the white working classes developed strategies for hiding their literacy in plain sight. Though their literacy was largely unsanctioned by power structures of the United States and Britain, they continued to practice it, as groups and as individuals, in spite of surveillance. To do so, underground literacy had to make use of existing systems for procuring print while also subverting those systems in order to resist social control. Therefore, the underground literacy practiced by these three groups used the apparatus of mainstream print, with its reliance on transportation systems and its practices of reprinting, to create a parallel apparatus of underground print that mimicked the mainstream while subverting its aims.

The need to go “underground” in order to practice literacy becomes evident when considering the varying extent to which achieving and practicing literacy was difficult for enslaved and free African Americans and American and British working classes in the antebellum era. This difficulty can be gauged, to a certain extent, by the limited availability of formal schooling available to these groups; the existence of low literacy statistics available through governmental, corporate, and religious sources; and the negative repercussions of practicing literacy in an economic and political environment that benefited from keeping African Americans and white workers uneducated.³⁶

In Victorian Britain, there was no infrastructure for universal education, and no laws to require it. According to Altick, the “state of education among the masses was still dreadfully low” in the 1840s (287): the reported universal literacy rate in Britain for males was 67%, for females 51%, in 1840 (380). Artisanal and industrial laborers—men, women, and children—worked ten- to fourteen-hour days that left little leisure time for

³⁶ I say “to a certain extent” because statistics are often misleading, particularly when they are based upon the ability to write one’s own name. As I discuss later, schools at the time taught reading before writing, meaning that many children stopped their schooling before learning to write.

reading and writing, and lived in crowded quarters with few opportunities for privacy or adequate light. In 1833, the first Factory Act was passed, limiting the work hours of children under twelve to nine hours per day, down from the previous twelve-hour day (Kirby 104); in 1844, the Second Factory Act lowered the child labor age to eight, but stipulated that children between eight and twelve could only be employed if they attended school three hours per day, and their work hours limited to six and a half (105).³⁷ This meant that working children still could only attend dame or charity schools in the evenings or on weekends. Furthermore, according to Rose, schools were often lacking in terms of literacy education: most focused on reading instead of writing, using the medieval “look and say” method (“Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader” 33-4). Adult workers faced the formidable challenge of educating themselves through evening schools and self-study, as well as “clubbing” informally and formally to share reading materials, since British “public” libraries, like “public” schools, were not open to the working classes (37). To address the lack of formal education among the working classes, the Chartist movement, in its peak years (1838-1848) stressed the importance of achieving societal equality through self-education, which, along with the growth of dissenting Protestantism among workers, raised the working-class literacy rate, according to Dorothy Thompson (6). Yet, as I mentioned previously in my discussion of Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* and will discuss further in chapter 2, the working-class press was often the subject of governmental scrutiny: many newspaper publishers and editors faced fines, imprisonment, and even transportation for seditious libel. Pubs and coffeehouses,

³⁷ According to Peter Kirby, the difficulty of enforcing the Factory Acts rendered them nearly “impotent” (105). The “relay” system, in which factories employed two different child labor shifts each day, meant that some children worked two shifts per day at different factories, making it nearly impossible to fine anyone (108).

which were often periodical libraries of sorts for working-class men and hubs of radical political discussion, were under surveillance by the government through the police and, sometimes, spies. Therefore, for the British working classes in the early Victorian era, achieving and practicing literacy was not only difficult, but potentially dangerous.

In antebellum America, the difficulty of achieving and practicing literacy for white working people varied by location and ethnicity. By the 1840s, “most” white Americans were literate because of the expansion of the public school system (Moran and Vinovski 289). Yet the availability of schooling does not tell the entire story. Born into a culture that valued literacy, particularly the ability to read the Bible, working-class “Yankee” children in New England were taught at home in “dame” schools and had the option of attending “common” or primary schools. In the rest of the country, however, public schooling was spotty, particularly in the South, where there was virtually no infrastructure for common schooling and the general illiteracy rate was 20% (Gross 525). Furthermore, American public schools, like British charity schools, used antiquated methods to teach reading, which resulted in some children completing their schooling illiterate or semi-literate.³⁸

But even for New England working-class children, school attendance was limited by the demands of domestic, agricultural, and industrial work. Statistics from Lowell, Massachusetts reveal that a large percentage of the children of industrial workers under the age of fourteen attended school at least some of the time, but only 12% of children

³⁸ Zboray claims that there may have been a “great deal of functional illiteracy” in the antebellum era (87). However, there are not adequate statistics regarding the quality of literacy. Zboray also states that the practice of reading aloud presents a “problem” to literacy statistics; he attempts to separate those who listened to texts being read from “the reading public for actual books, newspapers, and magazines” (88). In my view, because reading aloud was such a widespread practice, we need to view listeners and readers as consumers of texts.

older than fourteen did so (Dublin 178). This is also reflected in nation-wide statistics: despite the availability of education, only 38% of white children were enrolled in school in 1840, and 90% of those children attended a “common” school, meaning that attendance fell dramatically for most children after the common school was completed (Moran and Vinovski 290).³⁹ While American working-class children had a slight advantage over British working-class children in that public schooling was available to them, most of them could not attend for long. For immigrant children, literacy was more difficult to achieve, even if the language barrier was not an issue. Irish immigrants in New England, for example, were reluctant to send their children to common schools because they saw the curriculum as a tool for enforcing Protestantism. In Lowell, this problem was addressed by opening publically funded Catholic schools, but in much of New England, where immigrant populations were not as entrenched, this was not an option (Mitchell 53). Left in charge of their own educations, white American workers, like their British counterparts, were faced with a similar lack of resources: little time, money, and space for reading and writing. When textile workers attempted to read and write while minding their machines, they were faced with punishment, including being fired and blacklisted from finding employment at other mills (Zonderman 150, 159). One operative wrote, in a letter to the working-class newspaper *The Voice of Industry*, that she had been “turned out of the mill, for reading in the mill, and my name has gone to all the Black Lists kept at the counting rooms. I have no home, and I know not what to do”

³⁹ In New England, 82% of white children attended school in 1840; in the Mid-Atlantic states, the percentage dropped to 50%; in the South, it was as low as 13% (290-92). According to Moran and Vinovskis, this is because wealthy children did not attend public schools, leaving them with too few students to function (292).

(Dec. 11, 1846). Reading, while superficially encouraged by some mill owners, could result in the loss of a worker's livelihood if it made that worker less productive.⁴⁰

While practicing literacy was difficult and *sometimes* dangerous for white workers, it was *often* dangerous and sometimes even life-threatening for African American slaves. Literacy was never encouraged on a widespread basis for chattel slaves. Before 1830, some enslaved African Americans did have the opportunity of attending religiously sponsored schools, being taught along with white children in a domestic space, or being tutored by their master, mistress, or white children.⁴¹ In the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion and the widespread circulation of David Walker's *Appeal* in the early 1830s, opportunities for literacy became more limited and often carried the consequence of violent punishment for the student and teacher. Still, as I discuss in chapter 3, many slaves—perhaps more than we know—were at least semi-literate, making use of the texts and unexpected literacy lessons that chance placed in their everyday lives. Also, slaves and free southern blacks were often part of the same communities, and free blacks had more opportunity to acquire literacy, particularly if they had connections to free black communities in the North.⁴² This allowed for texts and informal education to infiltrate enslaved communities. There are no reliable general statistics for slave literacy, as it was necessarily enshrouded in secrecy, but estimates have steadily increased over the years, the most recent being a modest 10% (Cornelius 9).

⁴⁰ As I discuss further in chapter 4, some mill owners were eager to appear paternalistic by providing mill libraries and lyceums, but wanted to control what workers read and where and when they were allowed to read. Reading on the job, for capitalists, meant that production levels declined; reading while working was therefore like stealing from the corporation. This seems to be the major reason why steep punishments were sometimes enforced for reading on the job.

⁴¹ For an extensive discussion of opportunities for slave literacy, see Cornelius chapter 1.

⁴² David Walker, born to a slave and a free black woman, is an example of this. I discuss him at length in chapters 2 and 3.

Free African Americans in the North, particularly in urban areas, were surrounded by a thriving mainstream print culture and a public education system that welcomed most white children. Yet opportunities for achieving and practicing literacy were limited by discrimination. Banned from most white schools, even “common” schools, free blacks, like slaves, often had to depend upon (white) charitable schools or individuals for an education. Still, a “higher percentage” of black children ages 5-19 attended school in New England and Mid-Atlantic states than white children of the same age in the South (Moran and Vinovskis 293). Many black children and adults relied upon black newspapers and reading rooms to provide them with the materials for self-education, as I discuss in chapter 2. Yet, as with the white working classes, the demands of work and the limitations of domestic life made the practice of literacy difficult for free blacks, to say the least.

Given these adversarial circumstances, it becomes clear why so many scholars have assumed that African Americans and the white working classes were largely illiterate—to practice literacy in these conditions is, in itself, a defiant act. To practice literacy at the level that can be seen in black and working-class newspapers and autobiographies, as well as in unpublished manuscripts, seems nearly impossible. Yet it was not only possible, but (as I will show in the following chapters) a reality for at least some individuals, largely because of the mainstream transatlantic reprint industry.

In short, America and Britain reprinting provided the basis for underground literacy. As I have shown, reprinted books were cheap, making collective and individual book ownership possible; the practice of reprinting in periodicals provided even cheaper access to reading materials for communities and individuals. But more importantly, the

boundless nature of reprinting—its ability to escape control and ownership, to make texts malleable—provided an ideological and practical foundation for underground literacy.

The practices of reprinting, tied to revolutionary politics and democratic consumption of print, but also, ironically, the politics of *laissez-faire* economics that benefited elites, created an atmosphere in which texts became more readily available and more difficult to control. This, combined with the limitations imposed upon black and working-class literacy by the same anti-federalist political factions that made the reprint trade possible, forged a set of characteristics that define the literary practices of African Americans and the white working classes in the antebellum era.

As Thomas Cooper, Lucy Larcom, and Frederick Douglass illustrate in their autobiographies, the transatlantic reprint industry made various reprinted works—epics by “great” British authors, contemporary poetry, and radical oratory—available not only to privileged readers, but to African American and white working-class readers, groups deemed biologically and socially inferior. As these texts show, reprinted works were often acquired, not purchased: borrowed from friends or libraries, filched from the desks or libraries of overseers and masters, retrieved from the trash. These texts were read and recited at work, in the dark, in secret: in the underground. Underground readers, then, placed reprinted texts into new contexts, individual and communal, where they performed functions often unimagined by their authors or initial publishers, representing personal accomplishments, inner struggles, social mobility and defiance. I have just described the practices of underground reading, and while not all acts of underground reading seem politically radical now, they all defied the notion of inferiority through the following general strategies:

Communal and Serendipitous Reading: Just as practices of reprinting defied the idea of private ownership of texts, African Americans' and white workers' literacy did not depend upon traditional ownership of books, nor did it always depend upon strict definitions of being literate. To compensate for a lack of formal education and disposable income, communal reading strategies were employed to share texts and literacy skills. While, as we will see, these communities were sometimes formally organized, such as black literary societies and working class reading rooms, they were also sometimes improvisational and contingent, relying upon serendipity to place texts and teachers into the context of their daily lives. The role of chance in underground literacy also meant that reading habits had to be "omnivorous"—miscellaneous and wide-ranging. Chance encounters with texts, as well as the weekly newspaper format, encouraged this voraciousness.

Reading under Surveillance: As I highlighted above, African Americans and white workers had to practice literacy under surveillance to varying degrees. Much of this surveillance was associated with labor and the workplace, particularly as these groups spent most of their time working. In response to long hours of labor under almost constant surveillance, individuals found ways to incorporate texts into the context of labor. Reprint formats were easily adaptable to covert reading: columns were easily clipped from newspapers, and cheap bindings were easily broken in order to read books in sections easily hidden in a pocket.

Assimilative Reprinting: As I have shown, reprinting as an industry relied upon ingenious repurposing, fitting miscellaneous texts into a new context and creating a different message. This mainstream practice was employed by those practicing

underground literacy in various ways. Black and working-class newspapers reprinted from a wide variety of other periodicals, some of them adversarial, in order to inform readers and to directly challenge opposing viewpoints. Autobiographers borrowed the literary tropes of mainstream texts in order to add drama and familiarity to their narratives. And black and working-class poets contributed poems to periodicals that revised popular poetic forms, particularly Romanticism. These practices emulated mainstream practices of reprinting in order to subvert the assumptions of a hierarchical society that doubted the ability of African Americans and laborers to achieve equality. Representations of literacy—particularly reading reprints—became the primary means of demonstrating otherwise.

As these general characteristics of underground literacy reveal, and as subsequent chapters will illustrate in more detail, underground literacy was inseparable from the transatlantic reprint industry. Late eighteenth century reprinting, tied to radical democratic political groups in Britain and America, made radical texts available to “common” people on both sides of the Atlantic, developing underground strategies of sharing texts, reading aloud, and reading in secret, as the reprint history of Tom Paine’s works show. The transformation of reprinting into a mainstream industry made British texts popular with the middle and upper classes available to a wider readership through cheap editions and periodical formats. Mainstream reprinting, while supported by elite political interests, allowed reprints to proliferate and to further elude control, meaning that African-American and working-class readers could change the context of reprinted texts, assimilating them into new personal and political frameworks. Despite the limitations of black and working-class daily lives, or perhaps because of them,

underground literacy took shape in the antebellum era, relying upon but also subverting practices of reprinting. In chapter 2, I will investigate two similar scenes of underground literacy: how practices of reprinting in the British working-class newspaper, *The Northern Star*, and Frederick Douglass's newspapers are closely related to their strategy for representing the British working-classes and African Americans as literate and deserving of equality, directly countering the messages of the mainstream press.

Chapter 2

Feergus O'Connor's *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass's Papers: Radical Self-Representation, Underground Literacy, and Transatlantic Reprinting

"I will fix my eyes upon the PRESS, as the polar-star which is to direct us to the haven of freedom." –Arthur O'Connor, commenting on the founding of Irish nationalist papers *Harp of Erin* and *Northern Star* (1797)

"Oh! That the breath of our *Northern Star* may but equally raise the cause of liberty and freedom." –Feergus O'Connor, commenting on the founding of his paper (1837)

"The object of the *North Star* will be to attack slavery in all its forms and aspects; ...promote the moral and intellectual improvement of the colored people; and to hasten the day of freedom to our three million enslaved fellow countrymen." –Frederick Douglass, from his prospectus for the *North Star* (1847)

Named for the symbol of guidance toward freedom employed by liberation movements in Ireland, England, and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Northern Star* (1837-52) and Frederick Douglass's papers—the *North Star* (1847-1850) and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (1851-1858)—bear surprising resemblance to each other in appearance, content, and ideological agenda. The *Northern Star*, now considered by historians to be the central newspaper of the Chartist movement in Britain during its early years of publication, and Frederick Douglass's papers, now regarded as the first "colored" abolitionist newspapers to achieve large-scale circulation, were responsible for and benefitted from growing literacy and radical consciousness among those groups the papers sought to reach and represent: the working classes in Britain and African Americans (enslaved and free) in America, respectively. Founded and published by powerful orators and controversial leaders in their respective movements, Feergus O'Connor and Frederick Douglass, both papers were concerned from their inaugural issues onward with harnessing the power of self-representation through print and using it to appeal to, sustain, and raise the political consciousness of their desired constituencies.

This power, so often employed against the Chartist and Abolitionist movements by mainstream newsprint on both sides of the Atlantic, was seized by O'Connor and Douglass with the publication of the *Northern Star* and the *North Star* as they came to understand that newsprint was the primary means of political warfare and liberation in the 1830s, '40s, and '50s.¹

The power of radical newspapers from 1830 through 1860 depended upon reliable circulation to a mass readership of the working classes in Britain and blacks in America under oppressive circumstances that made the distribution of print difficult. Both groups, it has been assumed, had little access to literacy education and disposable income for the purchase of print based upon their disenfranchisement from political power, poverty resulting from the conditions of wage and chattel slavery, and the widespread discourse of their biological inferiority. Yet, despite these circumstances and laws that sought to inhibit circulation and readership, the Chartist and Black presses both managed to circulate papers to those at the bottom of national social and economic hierarchies, as is evidenced by surviving circulation figures, the editorial content of the papers themselves, and the impressively long print runs of the *Northern Star* and the Frederick Douglass's papers. They did so through three interrelated strategies: 1) employing newsprint as a literacy primer, stressing the communal aspects of working-class British and African American cultures; 2) using the mainstream press's convention of reprinting as a model, allowing radical papers access to cheap content while also providing an informal library for readers; and 3) employing reprinted texts as counterpoints to texts written by Chartists and African Americans, allowing textual self-representation of these groups to

¹ I discuss distinctions between "mainstream" and "radical" newsprint further in the first section of this chapter.

rhetorically challenge those of the mainstream press, promoting a radical group consciousness. By putting these strategies into practice, O'Connor and Douglass constructed their papers as scenes of working-class and African American reading that modeled *how* these groups should read while also giving them the tools to do so—and simultaneously countering widespread notions of their illiteracy.

The strategies employed by the *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass's papers to expand literacy and political consciousness closely match the strategies of underground literacy I have outlined in chapter 1. With the explicit purpose of freeing the disenfranchised through raising their political consciousness, both papers saw basic literacy as foundational to political and social equality. Therefore, their content is intended to function as a literary primer for those in the initial stages of learning to read, as well as a more sophisticated information source and literary guide for those with more advanced reading skills who could not afford or access bound books and mainstream periodicals. To accomplish this, both papers include addresses from their prominent founders and other luminaries of their respective movements that could be read silently by an individual or aloud to a group, but also reviews and reprints of popular British and American novels and poetry that make radical politics central to the critique. Most importantly, in addressing the disparate literary needs of their readership, both papers are perpetually fixated on the representation of their minority readerships in the mainstream press and in reacting to and correcting these skewed representations through self-representation by Chartist and black writers. In this chapter, I will examine how the *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass's papers intentionally situate this content in specific contexts in order to instruct readers how to read critically. Each of these

characteristics promotes the transatlantic practice of underground literacy through the subversive use of mainstream texts and reprinting strategies to achieve increased literacy among marginalized groups.

The papers' rhetoric, genres, and formatting are strikingly similar: like their radical forebears, the papers use democratic nationalist rhetoric to assert the personhood and citizenship of their readers. To this end, both employ popular genres of the period—biography and autobiography, poetry, fiction, and portraiture—to reassert group identity, and, crucially, both rely upon reprinting to spur these discussions. Reprinted material from mainstream periodicals forms the basis of the content for both papers. News reports and editorials involving the working classes in general and Chartists in particular provide foundational content for the *Northern Star*; likewise, those involving slavery, abolitionism, and African Americans generally appear constantly in Frederick Douglass's papers. In entirety or in excerpt, these reprinted articles are often accompanied by unambiguous editorial commentary and, in subsequent issues of the paper, articles by correspondents and letters from readers that directly counter these representations. Similarly, literary texts from the mainstream press are reprinted because of their explicitly or implicitly radical politics, either in support of the papers' agendas or against them. Editorials and letters accompany literary texts, asserting via politicized literary criticism how these texts represent the disenfranchised. Most significantly, both papers increasingly pair reprinted mainstream literary texts with those written by fledgling writers of their movements, texts that are influenced by mainstream literature in generic conventions but explicitly counter mainstream representations of the disenfranchised.

In this chapter, the scenes of reading that the *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass's papers construct through their similar content and context become a case study for rethinking shared strategies of radical print that crossed the Atlantic from the late 1820s through the 1850s, providing evidence for an underground literacy that reshapes current scholarly conceptions of working-class and African American literacy. Toward this end, the first section of the chapter provides a brief history of the papers' context within the Black and Chartist presses, highlighting how Black and Chartist newspapers created an environment for the practice of underground literacy in America and Britain. The second section of the chapter specifically illustrates how the *Northern Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* employed strategies of underground literacy and reprinting within specific issues in order to represent African Americans and the British working classes as literate and therefore equal citizens.

I. Liberation through Print: The *Northern Star*, Douglass's Papers, and Transatlantic Strategies of Underground Literacy

Despite the recent turn to transatlantic studies, particularly regarding race, labor, and the slave trade, significant connections between how radical movements in Britain and America in the 1830s-50s employed newsprint have been surprisingly few.² The most scholarly attention has been dedicated to the transatlantic abolitionist movement, specifically how the British were seen as saviors and England as a safe haven for many escaped slaves after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.³ While recent attention has been given

² Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993) is a seminal example of the turn toward the transatlantic when studying African-American authors. Recently, Eve Tavor Bannet and Susan Manning's essay collection, *Transatlantic Literary Studies, 1660-1830* (2012) outlines the many directions that the field has taken when studying earlier time periods, including focusing on transatlantic Romanticism, Gothic, and domestic fiction.

³ For studies about transatlantic abolitionism, see for example Elisa Tamarkin, "Black Anglophilia; or, the Sociability of Antislavery" (2002), W. Caleb McDaniel, "Saltwater Anti-Slavery: American Abolitionists

to the Chartist press and the Black press as separate entities from the abolitionist movement and from each other, virtually no effort has been made to explore their striking similarity in situation and strategy. This lack of scholarship on continuities between these presses can be attributed to three causes, in my view. First is the scholarly emphasis on the rhetorical tension and even hostility that arose between the British working classes and African Americans during the Civil War, when the Union blockade of Southern states caused the Cotton Famine, shutting down textile factories in Britain and putting thousands of British textile workers out of work.⁴ Furthermore, American pro-slavery apologists pointed to Chartist arguments about the continuities between chattel and wage slavery to discredit northern abolitionists and their British counterparts as hypocrites. And finally, as I will discuss later in the chapter, there are often silences in historical documents concerning the actual interactions between Chartists and African Americans in Britain and America. Yet these legitimate roadblocks to pursuing continuities between these groups, when viewed from the perspective of the groups in question, are largely a construction of those in power and not Chartists and African Americans themselves, as can be seen by looking at their publications instead of the mainstream press, which the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers encouraged readers to challenge.

When looking closely at the papers themselves, their similarities are undeniable, particularly the overwhelming focus of each upon the political power of literacy and the critical reading strategies that result. In this section, I will provide an overview of how

on the Atlantic Ocean in the Age of Steam" (2011), and Fionnghuala Sweeney, *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World* (2007).

⁴ On British workers, the American Civil War, and slavery, see for example R.J.M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (2001), Kelly Mays, "Slaves in Heaven, Laborers in Hell: Chartist Poets' Ambivalent Identification with the (Black) Slave" (2001), and Alastair Bonnett, "How the British Working Class became White: The Symbolic (Re)Formation of Racialized Capitalism" (1998).

the Chartist and Black presses arose because of radical political leaders' conflation of political equality and social freedom with literacy. To this end, I will situate the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers in the context of radical print of the 1820s and '30s, showing how they responded to the same challenges as their predecessors through their literary political agendas and underground circulation strategies. I will then look at the content of both papers and how they addressed varied literacy levels in working-class and African American communities, incorporating all literacy levels into a single scene of reading that challenged mainstream representations of both groups.

In examining these similarities between Chartist and Black papers, I want to emphasize that these similarities are not incidental, and that they force a reconsideration of the shared role of literacy in working-class and African American political movements and communities. Both Chartist papers and Black papers are designed to accommodate and encourage underground reading strategies, opening up new possibilities for establishing their marginalized constituencies as literate. Instead of being based upon a consumer model of literacy, which requires the direct exchange of capital for education and reading materials, the Chartist and Black presses were based upon communal models of literacy, in which the exchange of capital, while necessary for survival, was secondary to the exchange of ideas.⁵ An underground, community-based literacy, then, was central to radical politics and therefore became an organizing principle for radical presses of the antebellum period, as the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers reveal in their scenes of reading.

⁵ As Aled Jones notes, the *Northern Star* claimed in its 17 Nov. 1838 issue that its "conductors" had "no private or personal ends to obtain; no commercial speculation to subserve, by the prostitution of its columns. Their only end was the advancement of public liberty" (qtd. in Jones 8). While this should, of course, be taken with a grain of salt—the agents of the paper had to make a living—it is reflected in the overall financial aims of the paper, which I discuss in more depth below.

The Legacy of the Early Black and Working-Class Presses

In order to understand how these newspapers regarded the practice of literacy among the British working classes and African Americans, it is important to contextualize them briefly within the dynamic newspaper publishing industry in Britain and America, as well as within the Chartist and Black presses, of which they were an integral part. What are the main differences between “radical” newspapers such as the *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass’s papers and the “mainstream” newspapers they often directly attacked? In the late eighteenth century, newspapers became an increasingly visible form of print in Britain and America, and by the 1830s, they were primary reading material for people of all classes.⁶ In Britain, venerable newspapers with conservative editors such as the *London Times* were the most widely circulated, establishing themselves as authorities on British culture, both at home and abroad. Newspapers like the *Times* epitomize “mainstream” newsprint because they were well-known beyond their city of origin, represented the traditional values of those in power (the aristocracy and, increasingly, the bourgeoisie), and were seen by a large group of people (including outsiders) as representative of their culture.⁷ While newspapers like the *Times* grew in circulation and influence during the early nineteenth century, however, newspapers with editorial stances outside of the Tory-Whig paradigm also grew in

⁶ In America, newsprint became an “omnipresence” in the nineteenth century; the number of newspapers being published rose from about 200 in 1801 to 3000 in 1860 (Mott 167, 216). Mechanization of newspaper printing, particularly steamprinting, which was widely used in newspaper printing before book printing, enabled the rise of newsprint in both Britain and America (Mott 215; Feather 89).

⁷ Mainstream newspapers were Tory and Whig in orientation—the dominant political parties in Britain. My definition of what constitutes “mainstream” newsprint in Britain during this time period is influenced by Patricia Anderson’s argument that “popular” culture, including popular print, was a “varied and variable experience,” meaning that people of various classes participated in it with various responses (9). The term “popular” alone, then, is not adequate for describing the oppositional relationship between conservative newspapers like the *Times* and working-class papers like the *Northern Star*, which, as Ian Haywood and others have shown, “appropriated more and more” of popular culture “within their rapidly expanding counter-public sphere” (114). Instead, I use the term mainstream to suggest a “main” or dominant discourse that is both far-reaching in scope and limiting in terms of its inclusiveness.

number. Some of these newspapers, such as the working-class papers that gained momentum in the early nineteenth century, printed reports, ideas, and opinions that were considered “radical” by the editors and many readers of papers like the *Times*, and thus, can be seen as “radical” counterpoints to mainstream newspapers.⁸ The *Northern Star*, as a Chartist newspaper that advocated for the enfranchisement of working-class men and attacked Tory and Whig newspapers explicitly, was unquestionably a radical newspaper according to early Victorian standards.

In America, where newspapers were a major means of communicating anti-British opinion during the Revolutionary War, and where, during the Jacksonian Era, newspapers were an inflammatory means of political polarization, separating mainstream from radical is a bit more complicated, but a two-party political model remains definitive.⁹ While many major American cities and towns had rival newspapers advocating for the Whigs (later the Republicans) and the Democrats, there was still a distinction between mainstream and radical papers: “mainstream” partisan papers focused on the major issues of either party, attacking the other party’s positions, but were often in agreement regarding traditional values and hierarchies.¹⁰ Newspapers that sought to disrupt such hierarchies, advocating for the equality and enfranchisement of women, blacks, Native Americans, the poor, and other marginalized groups were considered

⁸ Chartist newspapers, for example, often took the form of mainstream papers, but departed from them in detail (Jones 3). Similarly, Chartist newspapers define themselves “dialectically” to the mainstream press, which had “rejected [their] politics and sought to resist [their] popular appeal” (6). Often, Chartist newspapers accused mainstream papers of becoming the “mouthpiece[s] of the rich and powerful” (10).

⁹ Mott calls the Jacksonian era the “dark age” of American journalism because the partisanship of the press often turned vitriolic; there were many libel cases, as a result (169; 172).

¹⁰ Many northeastern urban papers were Whig in orientation, however—especially in Boston (Mott 258). While these papers were more sympathetic toward the anti-slavery cause, they supported “monopoly and industrial domination” (257). Similarly, Leonard notes that many individuals and organizations who condemned slavery also condemned the anti-slavery press for being radical (71). *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* considered Whig and Democratic newspapers to support mainstream values, and was therefore critical of them (“The Pro-Slavery Press”).

“radical.”¹¹ Advocating for the abolition of slavery was, in particular, a radical stance; *The North Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, edited by a former slave and advocating for not only the abolition of slavery but the equality and enfranchisement of blacks, were considered extremely radical in agenda within this print milieu.

As radical newspapers that were explicitly at odds with traditional power structures and the newspapers that supported them, particularly in their advocacy of working-class and African American literacy, the *Northern Star* and Douglass’s papers emerged as part of larger radical movements within the newspaper industry—the working-class press in Britain and the Black press in America. Integral to the Chartist and black abolitionist movements, respectively, these presses sought to employ the increasingly evident power of newsprint toward radical political aims.¹² Becoming visible during the same decades and facing similar challenges, the Chartist and Black presses document the tenacity of besieged radical movements that sought to employ literacy as a political tool. Early incarnations of both presses faced social, economic, and legal barriers to the publication and circulation of their radically democratic agendas, and a brief history of these conditions reveals how the Chartist and Black presses forged the

¹¹ Mott identifies pro-labor and anti-slavery papers as related to (as in using similar formatting conventions and technology) but separate from major partisan papers of the era (205). Furthermore, Leonard argues that the mainstream press was threatened by the existence of the radical press because of its challenge to traditional hierarchies: “Reformers, in spreading news for all, were sweeping aside the old political leaders, the familiar newspapers, the established parties” and extending “an invitation to citizens assigned no political role in the normal course of Whig or Democratic campaigns” to participate, including women, children, free blacks, slaves, and the semi-literate (72). Additionally, Loughran notes that while the expansion of the abolitionist press is closely tied to the expansion of print, agitation against abolitionism in general and the abolitionist press in particular was spurred by the “mainstream commercial penny press” and other popular papers printed in the northeast, who would report the locations of abolitionist meetings and then, after mobs had broken up the meetings, report “sensationally” on the results (349).

¹² While the Black press was linked to the abolitionist press, they are not the same. The abolitionist press was largely controlled by whites; the Black press, by definition, was controlled by black editors and contributors and desired not only the abolition of slavery but the equality of blacks as American citizens. See Frankie Hutton’s introduction to *The Early Black Press in America, 1827-1860* (1993); Fanuzzi provides useful background for this distinction when he discusses Douglass’s break from Garrison in “Frederick Douglass’s ‘Colored Newspaper’.”

practices of underground literacy among the white working classes and African Americans—practices that the *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass’s papers would inherit.

Beginning with *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827 and David Walker’s *Appeal* in 1829, the Black press aggressively portrayed literacy as the “key” to liberation from slavery and racism, as Elizabeth McHenry has shown (99). Key figures in the early Black press employed the democratic rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence as well as prominent Enlightenment thinkers to argue for the equal rights of African Americans, and stressed that blacks must know how to read these texts and others in order to fully claim equal rights. Asserting the right to black citizenship, early black newspapers such as *Freedom’s Journal* envisioned equality within the existing system of American government, disagreeing with plans for the colonization of West Africa being proposed by whites and accepted by some blacks during this time.¹³ Seeing their papers as the primary means by which African Americans could achieve political consciousness and consensus, Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, editors of *Freedom’s Journal*, and David Walker, who wrote and edited the *Appeal*, emphasized the importance of acquiring, developing, and spreading literacy within African American communities, even if this literacy was systematically discouraged by whites through anti-literacy laws and threats of violence.¹⁴ In the inaugural issue of *Freedom’s Journal*, Cornish and Russwurm wrote, “We wish to plead our own cause...Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern

¹³ *Freedom’s Journal* dissolved in part because its editors disagreed over the issue of colonization.

¹⁴ There was no “overall ban” on slave literacy in the South, but five southern states passed anti-literacy laws between 1829 and 1834: Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina (Cornelius 12, 33). I discuss these laws and other uncoded acts against black literacy in chapter 3.

us dearly” (qtd. in McHenry 91). The primary means by which blacks could counter-represent themselves, they argued, was via reading and writing (91).

Within their papers, editors of early black newspapers sought to “advance and advertise” black literacy, modeling the acquisition of literacy and encouraging literate blacks to teach the semi-literate and illiterate—in secret, if necessary (McHenry 85). A crucial means of spreading this literacy was the reprinting of well-known, important texts that were important to the establishment of “literary character” but were not readily available to African Americans (McHenry 100). *Freedom’s Journal* printed poetry by British “masters” alongside poetry by black readers whom the paper consistently encouraged to become writers (101). Placing mainstream and black-authored texts together in the paper became, as McHenry suggests, a “literary exchange” that allowed blacks to acquire and improve their literacy as well as to “articulate their opposition to white oppression” (102). This reveals that the dialogue between mainstream and radical texts that Douglass would embed in his papers was a legacy from the early black press, which portrayed basic literacy as a critical dialogue.

The greatest challenge to the editors of *Freedom’s Journal* and the *Appeal* was circulation: in order for black literacy and literature to succeed, blacks must have access to the means of acquiring it. The mail system, through which most major newspapers were disseminated, was unreliable, particularly in towns hostile toward abolitionism. If newspapers managed to arrive at the post office, some postmasters who were known to work as unofficial censors confiscated radical newspapers. In the South, postmasters acted as “agents of surveillance,” tearing up abolitionist papers and even, in Virginia, drawing up a list of subscribers to “subversive literature” for continued surveillance

(Leonard 14). Across the nation, non-local papers were viewed suspiciously, particularly by “defenders of the racial status quo” who formed “vigilance committees” to stop abolitionist papers from circulating, sometimes through arson and violence (66-8).¹⁵ Far from protecting freedom of speech, President Andrew Jackson supported the policing of radical newsprint, calling abolitionist works in particular “incendiary publications” (68).¹⁶

The Black press’s response to these circulation difficulties exemplifies key aspects of the practice of underground literacy: the use of community connections along with the infrastructure of mainstream industry to circulate texts. To circumvent the challenges of circulating newsprint published by blacks in the racist north and the slave south, the editors of *Freedom’s Journal* circulated the paper through agents located throughout the country, including Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Louisiana, as well as Canada, the Caribbean, and England (Levine, “Circulating the Nation” 24).¹⁷ Cornish’s next paper, *The Rights of All*, employed the same system and perhaps the same agents, stating that the paper would be “sent to the care of several agents, who will please to [sic] obtain the names and residences of the subscribers, and hand them their papers”

¹⁵ Many examples of arson and mob violence against the abolitionist press exist. To name just a few: In Charleston in 1835, a post office filled with anti-slavery papers was broken into and only the abolitionist papers stolen; they were burned by a mob the next night (Leonard 69). In Cincinnati, white abolitionist printer Elijah P. Lovejoy’s press was destroyed four times; Lovejoy was shot and killed while trying to defend his press during the fourth attack in 1837 (70). In the north, 209 “hostile mobs” were reported in the anti-slavery press during the 1830s and ‘40s (69).

¹⁶ Like Jackson, other government officials took part in the unofficial censoring of the abolitionist and black presses. The mayor of Cincinnati, for example, participated in the dismantling of Lovejoy’s press in 1836 (Leonard 70). This further illustrates the distinction between radical and mainstream newspapers: elected government officials themselves exemplified the distinction by taking action against newspapers they considered radical.

¹⁷ Cornish’s personal history and profession reveal how he, personally, may have made community and print connections, even crossing the Mason-Dixon line: born to free parents in Delaware, he became a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia, “ministered to slaves on the Eastern Shore of Maryland,” and later ministered in New York (Vogel 39). Before *Freedom’s Journal* ceased publication, it listed thirty-eight agents from four countries (Levine, “Circulating the Nation” 24).

(qtd. in Levine 24). The language of “care” used here, and the stress on individual interaction, reveals the effort made to circumvent the untrustworthy mail system through reliance on community. When circulating the *Appeal*, Walker employed community connections as well as industry. After working as an agent for *Freedom’s Journal* earlier in the 1820s, Walker most likely employed his garment business, based in Boston, as a means of smuggling the *Appeal* to ports in the South, where agents, including black sailors, brought them directly to free and enslaved blacks (32).¹⁸ The most specific evidence that he was successful in this endeavor is the political action taken against him in several southern states: rewards were placed on his head by state governments, and he died under ambiguous circumstances in 1830.¹⁹ The stealth and danger inherent in circulating early Black newspapers, as well as the calculated reliance upon community and industry, forged alternative, underground means of distributing texts that would continue to influence the spread of black literacy.

Despite Walker’s death and laws against slave literacy resulting from Nat Turner’s highly literate account of his violent 1830 rebellion, the Black press continued to grow apart from the white abolitionist establishment and became the basis for a tentative black national print community. As many as one hundred black newspapers were printed between 1827 and 1855 (Vogel 38). According to McHenry, the early black press had “shaped a black readership” by providing black communities with “common

¹⁸ Frances Smith Foster and Kim D. Green write that Walker had a shop near the docks and “conventional wisdom has it that he outfitted sailors not only with clothing and supplies but also with copies of his *Appeal*, which they delivered to others” (56). While this method was “perhaps more covert than others,” it is nonetheless “typical of the marketing and distribution system that many African American writers developed” (56). Levine states that North Carolina tried to curtail the circulation of the *Appeal* by quarantining sailors and limiting the mobility of free blacks (“Circulating the Nation” 32).

¹⁹ Levine states that Walker was “found dead at his Boston home under suspicious circumstances” (“African American Literary Nationalism” 126). However, Sean Wilentz states that he may have died from fever (“Mysteries of David Walker” xix). Given the prices placed on his head because of the *Appeal*, it is possible that he was killed as a result.

reading material that was relatively easily obtained” (85). The next wave of black newspapers continued to advance basic literacy as the primary means of acquiring social and political equality, but emphasized the “acquirement of literature” as a means of gaining “cultural literacy” (103-4). With emphasis on informational and imaginative reading, newspapers such as the *Colored American* encouraged the formation of black literary societies, reading rooms, libraries, and other communal means of practicing politicized literacy attempting to make up for the exclusion of blacks from white venues of this nature (105-6). As a means of encouraging the founding of more black literary associations, the *Colored American* bragged about the large number of black societies already in existence in New York, reprinting the founding documents and minutes of established societies, as well as lists of known societies across the nation, revealing “just how extensive the network of reading associations was and how diverse they were in their activities” (109-10). These societies also served as an economic support network for Black newspapers, holding benefits for their sake (111). These benefits, along with pleas for financial support in the context of the papers themselves, reveal that while an extensive network of black literacy and print existed across the nation, it was consistently lacking in funds—a situation that made it difficult for one paper to achieve national status. Douglass inherited these strengths and weaknesses when he began the *North Star* in 1847: the Black press was a print network that necessarily valued flexibility and movement over capital gain, but nonetheless needed the latter to provide the former.²⁰ Despite the continued lack of monetary support, however, Douglass’s papers, as we will see, were indebted to the early Black press for their unflinching focus on the spread of

²⁰ Foster and Green, in their article “Ports of Call, Pulpits of Consultation,” reimagine the basis of African American literary activity based on the material movement of bodies and texts across seemingly rigid boundaries.

black literacy throughout the nation and their use of underground strategies to accomplish it.

Just as the challenges facing the early Black press became formative for Douglass's papers, the early British working-class press's strategies for facing mainstream and governmental opposition influenced the *Northern Star*. During the same decade that the Black press launched its first major newspapers, the working-class press in Britain expanded despite the government's attempt to silence it through the Six Acts of 1819, which, according to Dorothy Thompson, was the government's attempt to "price newspapers out of the working people's reach by the imposition of a heavy stamp duty on each issue" (37). According to the Acts, periodicals could not appear more often than once every twenty-six days, be priced cheaper than sixpence, or report on religion and politics—restrictions that essentially outlawed working-class newspapers, most of which fit the above description (Murphy 46). This legislation, like the southern legal response to Walker's *Appeal*, recognized that radical papers were finding a readership and therefore influencing the political opinions of the working classes, namely, encouraging the formation of labor unions and the reform of Parliament to include working-class MPs. To exert this influence, radical papers, like early Black papers, employed democratic rhetoric, particularly that of Tom Paine, connecting freedom of the press to increased political freedom for workers without changing the framework of British government.²¹ Similarly, while the unstamped press did not reprint as freely as the early Black press, one of its defining characteristics, according to Ian Haywood, was "its embracing of popular, often sensational forms of reading pleasure which enhanced rather than

²¹ According to E.P. Thompson, Paine's writings were widely influential to working-class print and politics from the late eighteenth century into the Chartist period and beyond. See his *Making of the English Working Class* (1966), chapter 5 and 14. I discuss this further in chapter 1.

diminished its radical appeal”; it passed this “legacy” down to the Chartist press (6).²² Also like the burgeoning Black press in America, the British working-class press responded to legal opposition defiantly by expanding and going underground, printing and distributing an “enormous wave” of unstamped papers, with editors and printers facing fines and imprisonment as a result (Murphy 46). And, just as the sometimes violent opposition to abolitionist print in America could not impair the movement or its print, rampant imprisonment among radical working-class publishers and booksellers resulted in a more cohesive working-class political movement that recognized the necessity of achieving a voice in Parliament.²³ By the early 1830s, working-class radicalism coalesced around print, encouraging the growth of working-class literacy despite the absence of public education and encouraging underground strategies for the practice of that literacy (Thompson 7).²⁴

Despite widespread and at times severe opposition, the unstamped press grew and became the basis of Chartism, the British political movement organized to support the People’s Charter, which, among other things, demanded the enfranchisement of working-class men.²⁵ Print and advocacy for increased working-class literacy, therefore, became central tenets of the movement, just as they were for black abolitionism. The major unstamped papers of the period were published by men who would take leading roles in

²² The early working-class press is sometimes called the “unstamped press” because so many working-class papers appearing during this time were unstamped, or printed illegally. For a discussion of the Unstamped Press, see Murphy’s *Toward a Working-Class Canon* (1994), chapter 2.

²³ Organizations such as the Association of Working Men to Produce a Cheap and Honest Press formed in opposition to the stamp duty; these would later become Chartist organizations such as the London Working Men’s Association (DorothyThompson 39). Interestingly, the former was founded by an American, a Dr. Black, to raise money to support imprisoned publishers’ families (40).

²⁴ I discuss specific working-class educational opportunities and literacy statistics in chapter 1.

²⁵ The People’s Charter, published in May 1838, included six points: it called for “universal male suffrage, protected by the ballot, the abolition of property qualifications for Members of Parliament, the payment of Members, equal electoral districts and annual parliaments” (D. Thompson ix).

Chartism: Bronterre O'Brien's *Poor Man's Guardian*, Joshua Hobson's *Voice of the West Riding*, John Cleave's *Weekly Police Gazette*, and Henry Hetherington's *Twopenny Dispatch* (Murphy 48). The Chartist press, which these men influenced, in turn became the organizing force of the movement.²⁶ Dorothy Thompson argues that the *Northern Star* and its many imitators were foundational to the way local communities engaged with the movement. In fact, Thompson goes so far as to say that the publication of the *Northern Star* in late 1837 is a more accurate date for the foundation of the Chartist movement than the publication of the actual People's Charter six months later (6). This is crucial when considering the history of working-class readership in England, because, as Thompson suggests, the Chartist press of the 1830s and '40s provided "further incentive" for the working classes to "master the basic skills of literacy" (6).²⁷ From Thompson's perspective, Chartism and the Chartist press were inseparable, meaning that the movement toward political enfranchisement was simultaneously a movement toward increased literacy that, because of government surveillance of the working-class press, ultimately became focused on the strategies of underground literacy.

The rise of the Chartist press, with its numerous local newspapers, provides basic evidence for Thompson's claim. From 1837 through 1848—the main Chartist period—numerous local weekly newspapers with a Chartist agenda were printed across England,

²⁶ The Newspaper Act of 1836 lowered the tax on newspapers from four pence to one penny; it also increased penalties for unstamped papers (Murphy 54). This essentially ended the "war of the unstamped."

²⁷ Thompson was one of the first Chartist historians to examine the movement from the perspective of its participants, and her claim that the press was foundational to Chartism reflects the "people's" perspective and reestablishes the importance of the Chartist press to British popular print history. Likewise, Ian Haywood asserts that the obscurity of the Chartist press in British history has been part of a deliberate "effort to obliterate the memory of Chartism," bringing about a "collective forgetting of a vital chapter in the development of nineteenth-century popular culture and popular politics" (5). According to Haywood, the reason behind this "forgetting" was the threat the Chartist press posed to mainstream British culture (5). Along with an obliterated memory of the Chartist press comes, as Thompson shows, a forgetting of the nature of working-class literacy.

Wales, and Scotland. While many of these papers did not circulate for even an entire year, the sheer number of papers printed during this time period for this particular audience reveals that the Chartist movement depended upon and encouraged working-class literacy. That a few titles achieved a massive readership despite widespread political and social resistance to Chartism underscores the existence of an underground literacy that was made possible and sustained in large part by Chartist newspapers. Like the Black press, then, the Chartist press stemmed from a network of politicized literacy that had grown despite widespread efforts to silence it. *The Northern Star*, as the best-known Chartist paper, benefitted from and extended this network in order to increase literacy and political awareness, as we will soon see.

This brief overview of the early Black and working-class presses defines a set of common problems that the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers would inherit. Systemic oppression against African Americans and the British working classes would continue to make the acquisition of literacy and reading materials difficult and even dangerous. Specific opposition to African American and working-class literacy would continue, keeping them from receiving even a modest education and limiting access to texts. In Britain, the New Poor Law of 1832 made work house conditions so dire that workers became more afraid of protesting falling wages and thus losing their jobs.²⁸ In America, the early and mid-1830s saw the rise of restrictions against slave literacy and resistance to the abolitionist press, even in the North. Like their predecessors, the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers were attempting to reach groups with supposedly low literacy rates

²⁸ The New Poor Law of 1834, also called the Poor Law Amendment Act, was politically galvanizing for the working classes because it decreed that insolvent families would be split up in the workhouse, an institution meant to offer "relief" from poverty. For a discussion of the New Poor Law and the beginnings of Chartism, see Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists*, chapter 1.

and little leisure time to read, and they had to do so despite untrustworthy distribution systems. Yet, at the same time, unfavorable political and social circumstances made the message of liberation through print even more necessary to disseminate. Therefore, despite these prohibitive circumstances, newspaper founders Feargus O'Connor and Frederick Douglass gambled their personal funds and public personas in order to bring radical print—and with it, more sophisticated literacy—to national working-class and African-American audiences.

Feargus O'Connor and Frederick Douglass: Persona and Print

While the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers owed much to their predecessors' definition of radical print culture and perseverance in the face of adversity, they became the most well-known and widely circulated titles of their kind in large part because they were able to capitalize not only upon existing social frameworks and improved print technologies, but also the celebrity and, in some cases, notoriety of their founders. O'Connor and Douglass were both charismatic public figures known for their oratory and thus became the representative personas of their political movements, giving them access to connections and capital that other radical papers lacked. Their fame became an asset as well as a challenge for their papers. O'Connor and Douglass's visibility included, on one hand, being regarded as heroes by followers, but on the other hand, negative portrayals in the mainstream press as well as among rival radical leaders who had become alienated from O'Connor and Douglass by internal conflicts in the Chartist and abolitionist movements. By conflating their own identities with their papers and therefore their desired readers, both O'Connor and Douglass capitalized on their visibility in the public sphere in order to bolster the success of their papers. Therefore, before examining the

content and political goals of the *Northern Star* and Frederick Douglass's papers, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the public persona of both figures.

Before Douglass began publishing the *North Star*, he had already established a public persona as self-educated former slave primarily through William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator* and organizer of traveling abolitionist lectures. Yet Douglass's decision to publish a paper of his own was met with resistance from both the political enemies he shared with Garrison as well as Garrison himself. While the story of Douglass's break with Garrison has been told elsewhere, I want to emphasize how his distance from white abolitionists and white-controlled abolitionist print culture emerged after his return from a protracted tour of Britain, when he began articulating his growing radicalism and launched the *North Star*, a self-consciously black abolitionist paper that drew its racial authenticity from his public persona. This moment in Douglass's career as a speaker, writer, and editor is particularly important because it shows how his turn toward newsprint was influenced not only by the Black press, but by connections he made in Britain, particularly among radicals.

Though Douglass had toured Britain with Garrison, communication broke down between them after Garrison returned to the States because of their disagreement over Douglass editing his own paper.²⁹ Douglass saw this resistance as telling of the unequal power dynamic between himself and Garrison, and its implications extended into print: *The Liberator* purported to speak for enslaved and free African Americans, who "composed its original and most loyal readership," but was controlled by white abolitionists (Fanuzzi 56-57). But what if those white abolitionists could not accept "the

²⁹ Garrison told Douglass that a black paper would not draw a large enough readership to support itself and said that "the land is full of the wreck of such experiments" (qtd. in Foner 78).

advancement of a former slave” to a position of authority in print? An African-American run abolitionist paper became necessary in this situation not only to advocate for the freedom of enslaved blacks, but to advance the social and political equality that Douglass saw as the foundation of true freedom. The simultaneity of Douglass’s break from Garrison and his growing radicalism with his foray into the Black press underscore Vogel’s assertion that “Douglass broke free from Garrison to demonstrate that the black man could think for himself and write on his own” (48). The *North Star* began, then, because Douglass saw the need for black self-representation in the abolitionist movement and believed that he now had enough publicity among potential readers to support the paper.

Interestingly, Douglass’s conception of the *North Star*, his “colored” paper, is rife with British influence, which is significant when discussing the paper in context with the *Northern Star*. This influence begins in the industrial north of England (where the *Northern Star* began and had its largest readership), Scotland, and Ireland, where Douglass drew large crowds to his speeches and where he observed the poverty of working-class whites, encouraging him to link class and race-based oppression (McFeely 138-139; Foner 63). These same crowds allowed Douglass’s British “friends” to raise £500 for Douglass to start a paper and procure numerous subscriptions for the paper in Cork (O’Connor’s home county and hotbed of Irish nationalism), Dublin, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and Halifax (Foner 147; 150).³⁰ This reveals that while Douglass toured Britain,

³⁰ Douglass’s support in Cork is particularly interesting because of the county’s connection not only to Feargus O’Connor, but also his uncle, Arthur O’Connor, a Cork radical of the previous generation, whose speech appears in *The Columbian Orator*, a book that Douglass specifically mentions reading in secret while a slave in his 1845 autobiography. While in the *Narrative* Douglass mentions “one of [Richard Brinsley] Sheridan’s mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation” as being influential to him, especially its “bold denunciation of slavery, and...powerful vindication of human rights,” editors William S. Andrews and William S. McFeely point out that this speech was actually O’Connor’s (Douglass

even with Garrison as a companion, his mind was on starting a paper as he interacted with British radicals. In August of 1846, Douglass and Garrison met with William Lovett and others of the London Working Men's Association—formerly the Association of Workingmen to Produce a Cheap and Honest Press—to discuss beginning a counterpart to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, a largely upper and middle-class run organization that focused solely on abolition, called the Anti-Slavery League, which would more broadly take up “the cause of [oppressed] humanity...the world over” (126). This meeting, which lasted six hours, concluded with a speech by Henry Vincent, head of the Association, that compared the cause of the British working classes to that of slaves (139). While McFeely considers the outcome of this meeting a disappointment and calls Douglass's failure to fully join forces with working-class agitators “one of the great missed opportunities of Douglass's life,” Douglass's subsequent fixation on beginning his own paper appears to be no coincidence, particularly given the central place of newspapers in the Chartist movement (138).

The potential influence of the Chartist press on Douglass's conceptualization of his paper becomes clearer given his five-month speaking tour in the north of England after Garrison returned home, during which he spoke “almost every night” (Foner 73). Douglass wrote few letters during this period—none to Garrison, to whom he had earlier detailed the business of his tour—thus giving little indication of how this potential influence specifically occurred. Yet, this part of his tour would have placed him in the heart of Chartist print culture, and, as he had already formed a liaison with Chartist leaders in London, it seems likely that Douglass came into contact with radical working-

32). Douglass would use the same name for his first newspaper as Arthur O'Connor used for his Irish nationalist paper, as the quotes beginning this chapter illustrate.

class newspapers. More significantly, during this time Douglass met Julia Griffiths, the future assistant editor and financial director of his papers, in the northern town of Newcastle-on-Tyne, which had long been a center of working-class organization and where the British agent for *Frederick Douglass' Paper* would soon be located.³¹ Clearly, given the money that Griffiths and others raised specifically for Douglass's paper during and after this part of the tour, and Douglass's hiring of a British printer in Rochester, NY to bring out the *North Star*, a link between British working-class print culture and Douglass's foray into the Black press is highly probable.

Douglass's founding of the *North Star* despite Garrison's disapproval led to his becoming an increasingly controversial public figure: a self-taught black man, formerly a slave, was now publishing a self-consciously black abolitionist paper, making Douglass a public example of his newspaper's political goals of literacy and equality for all African Americans.³² To promote the *North Star*, Douglass relied upon his continued popularity in the black community despite the ire of Garrisonians. In the first issues of the paper, Douglass linked his public persona to the goals of the paper, attempting to convince black readers that he served as a model for black "progress toward freedom and enlightenment"—something that Garrison could not purport to do (Fanuzzi 59). Douglass portrayed the success of the paper as its ability to find a black readership because the existence of that readership testified that blacks transcended racist stereotypes of ignorance and illiteracy. Therefore, the success of the *North Star* was conflated with the

³¹ E.P. Thompson discusses, in particular, the presence of working-class organizations and "friendly societies" in Newcastle-on-Tyne in the 1830s and '40s. See *Making of the English Working Class* chapter 12, "Community."

³² One aspect of Douglass's growing radicalism was his support of John Brown, whom Garrison considered dangerous. But more importantly, Douglass wrote and spoke of black elevation in "increasingly militant terms" and became suspicious of the religious "rhetoric of providentiality," relying instead on the "power of human agency" (Fishkin and Peterson 77).

fate of African Americans (60). Controversially, however, Douglass accepted monetary support from Garrett Smith, the white leader of the Liberty Party, rival to Garrisonian abolitionism, because subscriptions alone could not sustain the paper (64). This led to a print war with Garrison, the racial implications of which, along with the devastating 1850 Runaway Slave Act, motivated Douglass to change the name of the *North Star* to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, leaving no room for misinterpretation of the paper's origins, politics, or racial affiliation.³³ Ironically, Douglass's racial claims about his paper alongside his continued monetary and ideological partnerships with affluent whites such as Garret Smith and Harriet Beecher Stowe alienated him from some black leaders such as Martin Delany and William C. Nell, who wrote for *The Liberator*. Despite this, Douglass maintained popular support and even adoration in black communities across the nation; he also retained his British support base with "quite a few subscribers" in Britain in the 1850s (Foner 91). Political divisions within the abolitionist movement and amongst black leaders did not dissuade readers from Douglass's papers, but may instead have attracted them, as is suggested by the editorial debate about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to be discussed later in the chapter. Either way, Douglass's perception of his newspaper as a specifically black abolitionist newspaper was clearly tied to his own public persona as self-educated, literate former slave, underscoring the newspaper's goal of spreading literacy among black communities.

Like Douglass, Feargus O'Connor's public persona and his engagement in the events and political debates that defined Chartism were instrumental to the success and character of his newspaper. In fact, O'Connor's career as a Chartist agitator and his

³³ Fanuzzi suggests that Douglass accused Garrison of trying to rid the abolitionist movement of black leaders (66).

motivations for beginning a paper parallel Douglass's in unexpected ways. From a prominent Irish radical family, O'Connor was a barrister and M.P. for County Cork until 1835, when he turned to grassroots political organizing as his primary vehicle of social change (Dorothy Thompson 18). He had inherited this from his notorious family. His father, Roger O'Connor, was "a criminal thug and a dangerous revolutionary" from the perspective of the British government but a hero in the eyes of the Cork peasantry. He was a leader of the United Irishmen, which also produced a nationalist paper, the *Harp of Erin*, before being forced to leave Ireland as punishment for his political activities (Pickering 6). Likewise, Feargus's uncle, Arthur, became radicalized while serving in the Irish House of Commons; after being expelled for supporting Catholic Emancipation, he began publishing nationalist newspapers, including the *Northern Star* of Belfast, and was later charged with seditious libel and exiled to France (10). Raised in political exile in England, Feargus came to consciousness politically as a racial outsider and colonial subject: despite the fact that his family had wealth and status in Ireland, the doors of privilege were closed to him because he was an Irish nationalist under English rule. In his early political writings and speeches, he employed the rhetoric of slavery to oppose the conditions of English rule, calling Irish peasants his "co-slaves," driven to "desperation" by the government (19). While demanding equal rights for the Irish, his consciousness of race and class, freedom and slavery joined him to English radical working-class consciousness, particularly as many English industrial workers were of Irish descent. In the mid-1830s, O'Connor, like Douglass a decade later, traveled through the industrial districts of northern England and Scotland; the oppression of the working classes in these areas "sharpened his awareness of class" and further radicalized his politics, a reaction

mirrored by Douglass (74). Just as Douglass returned from his journey radicalized and ready to begin his own paper, O'Connor committed himself to Chartist agitating through print as a result of his tour. He founded the *Northern Star* after establishing connections in the working-class press during his tour and serving as associate editor of the *Glasgow Liberator* for eight months in 1837 (Pickering 76). The *Northern Star*, like the *North Star*, received grassroots monetary support from the north of England: northern radicals raised £690, which, combined with O'Connor's personal funds, established the newspaper (75).

As arguably the most publically recognizable Chartist leader, O'Connor became a divisive figure, separating working- and middle-class radicals and alienating Whigs, particularly on the grounds of physical versus moral force Chartism (Dorothy Thompson 33). As Thomas Milton Kemnitz notes, Chartism has been divided into these camps mainly by historians, and O'Connor has been placed on the more radical side of this false dichotomy. In reality, instead of actually applying force to coerce the government into giving the working classes the vote, O'Connor used what Kemnitz calls "the language of force" to "intimidate," employing the *Northern Star* as a vehicle for this language (69). Hinting at what might happen instead of blatantly advocating and organizing violence, O'Connor, via the *Northern Star*, engaged in "aggressive sloganeering" that involved radically democratic rhetoric while simultaneously advocating the use of "every moral means" first (70).³⁴ While his aggressive language may have alienated him from "moral

³⁴ Dorothy Thompson similarly revises the way O'Connor has been written about by previous Chartist historians, arguing that when examined from the people's perspective, particularly those of the northern textile districts, O'Connor is less of an "evil genius" and more of a people's hero (96). According to Thompson, much vilification of O'Connor was due to his opposition to the middle class: he wanted the working classes to develop independently of the middle classes and so evoked hostility from them—as well as from bourgeois historians of the movement in the twentieth century (97).

force” Chartists, from the perspective of the northern textile districts in particular, where working-class consciousness was solidified by inhumane working hours, factory conditions, and lowered pay rates, and where, as a result, Chartism won the widest popular support, O’Connor was considered a hero. To encourage this perception, the *Northern Star* printed portraits of O’Connor (one portraying him with newspaper and pen) that readers hung in private homes and beer halls, and ballads were written for him, published as broadsides, and sung publically.³⁵ The heroism attributed to O’Connor by the working classes was certainly based on myth, but the reality of his commitment to the movement is apparent when considering that he used his own funds to finance the *Northern Star* and the movement generally and served several jail sentences for his Chartist activities.³⁶ The *Northern Star* ultimately reflected and helped to create O’Connor’s public persona as a highly literate, articulate lover of liberty willing to fight for the cause of Chartism, and as such, the newspaper employed him as a model for working-class readers.

Collaboration, Community, and Underground Reading Strategies

As I suggested in my discussion of the early Black and working-class presses, fostering community connections through the agent system and employing the infrastructure of existing industries became a central strategy for circulating radical

³⁵ The *Northern Star* issued two portraits of O’Connor: one in December 1837 and another in December 1840. All of the *NS* portraits are reproduced by Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition (NCSE) and are available online. Martha Vicinus cites a ballad entitled the “Lion of Freedom”: “He’s terror of the tyrants, the friend of the slave, / The bright star of freedom, the noblest of men, / We’ll rally around him again and again” (qtd. 302).

³⁶ O’Connor would serve the first of these sentences for seditious libel—like his father and uncle—in May of 1840. In the case, he defended himself with much rhetorical flourish, all of which was lost on the jury. When he was sentenced, O’Connor made a speech stating, in his usual inflated rhetoric, that should he have to die for the cause, he would “die as [he] had lived—a pure lover of liberty” (Pickering 86). Concerning O’Connor’s personal monetary contribution to the *Northern Star*, the exact amount is unknown. Pickering guesses that O’Connor’s personal contribution was “probably less than he implied but certainly more than his critics...allowed” (75).

newsprint in hostile environments. In order to produce, print, and circulate the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers, O'Connor and Douglass, too, employed a network of agents, correspondents, and other collaborators to place their newspapers into the hands of black and working-class readers. While Douglass was much more directly involved in running his papers than O'Connor, both worked with other well-known radical figures, emphasizing how politics and print were closely linked, even across hundreds of miles. In fact, the networks of print that O'Connor and Douglass relied upon to produce their papers became instrumental to the creative distribution strategies both employed to reach a wide readership. Both the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers employed men who multi-tasked as contributors and distributors, providing content for the paper while also acting as agents of distribution.³⁷ In their capacity as agents, these men interacted closely with communities of working class and black readers and could therefore personally reinforce the political importance of literacy and the strategies of underground reading promoted by their papers.

Like their predecessors in the radical presses, as well as other mainstream periodicals, the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers employed agents for circulation, depending upon existing networks of radical print and expanding upon them. For radical newspapers, agents played an important role in the spread of underground literacy. They were often individuals who were simultaneously involved in a mainstream industry, often the print trade, and radical political organizations. Newspaper owners and editors chose

³⁷ Did women act as agents for the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers? Dorothy Thompson states that the *Northern Star* agency in Nottingham was "held by Mrs. Smith," but little is known about her (137). Also, Thompson mentions that a woman named Alice Mann may have been a journalist in Leeds, but again, little information about her is provided (39). Similarly, while black women were highly involved in establishing literary societies and reading rooms in northern cities, and that they raised money to support the Black press, is it not known whether any were agents of Douglass's papers.

agents strategically located in areas where mainstream circulation methods, such as the mail, were unreliable, and where the agents' businesses and community connections made the newspaper more visible. Pragmatically, the agent system was attractive because it decreased cost for publishers and dependency on the unpredictable mail systems of Britain and America. While the *Northern Star* was a legal, stamped paper, selling at three pence a copy, it became more efficient for the paper to be sold through local agents scattered across England, Ireland, and Scotland than through the undependable mail. For Douglass, who had longer distances and an at times hostile mail system to contend with, the agent system was the only means by which the paper could achieve any kind of reliable circulation.

Beyond the pragmatics of the mail, both papers employed agents because they were politically reliable and understood the risk of printing and selling radical papers. Many agents for the *Northern Star* were formerly imprisoned for publishing and selling unstamped papers (Thompson 39). Douglass's network of agents came from the tradition of *Freedom's Journal*, which provided the beginnings of a "cooperative system for the distribution of knowledge and pertinent information in antebellum black communities" (McHenry 37). These informal networks of print that resulted from the agent system were due also to the traveling nature of O'Connor and Douglass's careers: as they traveled from one speaking engagement to the next, they made meaningful connections that would strengthen the circulation of their papers. The British agents for *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, for example, were located in the industrial north of England and came from a radical print tradition that Douglass came in contact with during his British tour (*FDP* 8

Jan. 1852, 2; McFeeley 145).³⁸ Both papers forthrightly described their distribution methodology: agents paid for papers that they ordered and then sold them to local readerships (Jones 15). *Frederick Douglass' Paper* even published the profit that agents made on each paper sold, perhaps as a means of recruiting new agents (*FDP* 8 Jan. 1852, 2). Due to the agent system, the papers were able to reach readers that would otherwise have no access to them because of location and political opposition. The *Northern Star*, for example, was the “only paper to circulate in a number of south Lancashire villages” (Jones 17). Douglass’s papers, unlike other localized or short-lived Black newspapers of the antebellum period, found a national readership because they were distributed through agents with connections to sympathetic local communities.

The *North Star*’s most significant agent was Martin Delaney, who, in the summer of 1847 was training to be a doctor while also editing *The Mystery*, a black newspaper based in Pittsburgh. Despite his later disagreements with Douglass, Delany was instrumental in launching the *North Star*. Douglass met Delany during his “western tour” for the *Liberator*, which he undertook before breaking with Garrison (Levine, *Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass* 19). When Douglass decided to launch the *North Star* that fall, he named Delany his co-editor, although Delany’s primary role was traveling agent and correspondent, distributing the paper while also contributing to it (20).

Delaney’s dual role illustrates the necessary creativity that the Black press had employed since its beginnings in the 1820s. The mobile Delaney could find new agents and readers for the *North Star* among abolitionist and black communities hundreds of miles away from western New York, where the paper was published, and place copies of

³⁸ This is one illustration of Foster and Green’s assertion that black authors and publishers capitalized on travel as a means of circulation (56).

the paper into trustworthy hands, thus circumventing the mail and its potentially sinister postmasters. At the same time, Delaney established political contacts and generated national content for the paper that would interest readers beyond Rochester, NY. After a productive eighteen-month period as co-editor, however, Delany quit to attend Harvard Medical School and was subsequently radicalized by his dismissal from the school on racial grounds (2). Retrospectively considered the father of black nationalism, Delany began advocating black separatism and colonization in his writing—positions that Douglass vehemently disagreed with in the pages of his papers (2). Once partners unified by the notion of black equality through literacy, Douglass and Delany became opponents, and Delany's voice was largely dropped from Douglass's papers until 1853, when Delany's letters disputing Douglass's support of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were published along with Douglass's responses in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, as will be discussed later in more depth.³⁹ They remained, therefore, part of the same network of print that they had established early in their relationship.

Douglass had a more consistent and less contentious relationship James McCune Smith, the University of Glasgow-trained doctor who, upon his return to America in 1837, became a practicing doctor and journalist for the Black press (Vogel 40). Smith worked closely with Samuel Cornish, initially an editor of *Freedom's Journal*, on *The Colored American*, in which he simultaneously attacked colonization as a product of racist and classist ideology and sought to convince black laborers that they could achieve racial and economic equality in America (40).⁴⁰ Like Douglass, Smith advocated for a

³⁹ Levine devotes an entire chapter to this dispute in *Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass*.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, Vogel compares Smith's anti-aristocratic rhetoric with Tom Paine's "railing against George III," which parallels Smith's rhetoric with that of the Unstamped Press of the 1820s and '30s (40). This

“more fully inclusive notion of republicanism” based on the Declaration of Independence (40). Because of this ideological similarity and what Douglass referred to as Smith’s “keen and polished” writing, Douglass regarded Smith as his “foremost” influence and strongest supporter (40-41). Smith worked as co-editor of the *North Star* and later as the Brooklyn correspondent for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, sometimes writing under the pen name “Communipaw.” While not formally considered an agent, Smith, like Delaney, became a means of extending the reach of Douglass’s papers in terms of content and distribution because of his community connections as a doctor, his connections to the Black press, and his radical politics.

O’Connor, like Douglass, collaborated with individuals who were visible in working-class communities because of their trade and their politics, making them ideal candidates for gaining readers. Unlike Douglass, O’Connor did not edit his own paper, instead filling the position of figurehead and contributor. The job of editing the *Northern Star* was first undertaken by William Hill and was then passed to Joshua Hobson, the initial printer and agent of the paper (Jones 18). Hobson had worked as a handloom weaver in the Oldham textile district before becoming the publisher of the unstamped paper *Voice of the West Riding*, serving several short prison terms in the early 1830s for this work, the first when he was only nineteen (18). In addition to being the publisher, agent, and editor (from 1843-45) of the *Northern Star*, Hobson was an independent publisher and bookseller who brought out a “wide range” of other radical titles in the 1830s and ‘40s, many of which are advertised in the paper (18). Therefore, Hobson, like Delaney and Smith, became a key figure in the community-based textual network that

raises questions about the possibility of Smith being influenced by the working-class press when he was living in Britain in the 1830s.

produced and distributed the *Northern Star*, ensuring that readers had access not only to the paper, but to other radical texts that would simultaneously encourage literacy and political activism. In turn, Hobson's close interaction with working-class communities ensured that the paper's content remained relevant to workers while O'Connor was politicking. Interestingly, Hobson, like Delaney, was more radical than his employer: a physical-force Chartist, Hobson supported using arms to create a "revolutionary situation," forcing the government to support the People's Charter (Kemnitz 71). Yet Hobson did not transform the *Northern Star* into an organ for physical-force Chartism, nor did he have a falling out with O'Connor. Instead, he seems to have integrated O'Connor's vision for Chartism with the voices of other radicals via his printing and distribution of multiple radical texts. Because he was a former textile worker who now purveyed his radical politics through print in various forms, Hobson had the community contacts to reinforce what was perhaps the *Northern Star's* most salient message—literacy as a means to political enfranchisement.

Through the use of agents, editors, and correspondents who were engaged in working-class and black communities across their respective nations, the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers were able to become part of the improvisational, transient, and diverse literary cultures within these communities. As previously mentioned, because of their lack of formal education, income, and leisure time, the British working classes and African Americans could not become conventional consumers of print. Reflecting the papers' knowledge and affirmation of this underground literacy, the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers were distributed unconventionally and constructed to be read in communal situations by individuals with disparate literary skills. The miscellaneous

content, broadsheet format, and even advertisements were designed to be consumed in unexpected settings by readers who may not have had access to any other reading materials. As a result, these papers were designed to be simultaneously used as literary primers for those still learning basic literacy and as literary miscellanies for more advanced readers. By lending themselves to extemporaneous reading in communal situations, the papers both acknowledged the unconventional scenes of reading that characterized literary engagement in these communities and, at the same time, attempted to advance this literary engagement.

The *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers were often passed among multiple readers or read communally, giving access to those with limited resources or literacy. In Britain, some working-class readers subscribed as a group instead of buying individual copies. Others had the *Northern Star* read aloud to them while they worked, such as the flax dressers of Dundee (Dorothy Thompson 109). Pubs, coffeehouses, and other drinking establishments often made radical papers available to patrons: Lovett's coffee house in London, for instance, had subscriptions to numerous periodicals, mainstream and radical (Thompson 41; Haywood 130). News agents often ran reading rooms where papers could be read for free or a small hourly fee, and workers themselves organized reading rooms and libraries. Jonathan Rose offers the example of Carlisle, where twenty-four reading rooms were opened among workers between 1836 and 1854, some of which offered classes in reading and writing ("Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader" 37).⁴¹ In these alternative libraries, patrons had access to radical newspapers alongside mainstream titles. Doherty's reading room in Manchester, patronized by the working

⁴¹ This likely contributed to a rise in Carlisle literacy from 64.85% in 1831 to 92.6 % in 1871 (Rose, "Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader" 38).

classes, carried as many as ninety-six newspapers each week, including mainstream titles from London, Belfast, Dublin, Liverpool, and Glasgow as well as radical papers (Murphy 21). The working classes also had access to mainstream print through unconventional means: they sometimes “rented” them from newsvendors, “inherited” them from employers—which may be another word for stealing—or as wrapping from the greengrocer (Murphy 21). The *Northern Star*, as I will discuss later, encouraged this wide-ranging and creative reading of the news so that working-class readers could educate themselves in the workings of mainstream culture.

Similarly, in America, there were many sanctioned and unsanctioned opportunities for African Americans to read Douglass’s papers communally and alongside mainstream print. In northern cities, Black newspapers became primary texts in the libraries of black literary societies, in reading rooms, and in some schools for free blacks (McHenry 93). Meanwhile, multiple opportunities to “inherit” mainstream and radical newspapers or to overhear the public reading of mainstream newspapers also existed for African Americans, often because of their status as servants or slaves and the common assumption that blacks were less intelligent than whites and therefore uninterested in print. As Thomas C. Leonard has suggested, “open ears and a sharp eye” allowed blacks surreptitious access to mainstream newsprint (6). American newspaper culture, like that in Britain, was closely connected to drinking establishments. Like beer halls in Britain, many urban and provincial American taverns subscribed to a variety of newspapers (7). While African Americans were often unofficially excluded as patrons from these establishments, their presence as servants was permitted, allowing them

access to the public reading of newspapers “over other people’s shoulders” (15).⁴² This is also true in the South, where Leonard argues that whites were “haunted by fear that African Americans might use their position on the plantation to see the news and know too much” (15). These fears were confirmed by the 1822 account of Denmark Vesey’s South Carolina slave conspiracy, in which co-conspirators reported being inspired to revolt by reading anti-slavery speeches in northern newspapers (Levine, “Circulating the Nation” 21).⁴³ Poor whites reportedly envied house slaves’ access to newsprint in the homes of the “rich and refined” (Leonard 20). Ironically, some of these southern homes may also have afforded slaves the opportunity to read abolitionist papers: Leonard asserts that a “blizzard” of radical print from the North descended upon the South during the Jacksonian era despite many attempts to prevent it, prompting local surveillance of the mail (67). The extreme reactions to this “blizzard,” which I discussed earlier, suggest that the presence of abolitionist print was more pervasive than has been assumed (67).⁴⁴

Because both the *Northern Star* and Douglass’s papers were read in unexpected situations, and because copies were often shared, the papers were formatted to include as much diverse content in as little space as possible. To do so, they employed the broadsheet format also used by many mainstream papers. According to Haywood, the genre of the “newspaper-cum-broadsheet” emerged in the late 1830s and influenced other popular titles as well, such as the *Illustrated London News* (131). This departed from the

⁴² As Leonard notes, this is documented in William Sidney Mount’s 1850 painting entitled *California News*. The painting depicts a group of white men and one woman gathered around a newspaper, while in the background, an African American man listens and looks toward the paper (15). A similar scene is depicted in the painting *War News from Mexico*, which I discuss in the introduction.

⁴³ Co-conspirator Monday Gell reportedly “read daily the newspapers” and then communicated the news to other slaves (Levine, “Circulating the Nation” 21).

⁴⁴ For more about how slaves accessed texts in the South, see chapter 3. Also, for ways that abolitionist print reached the South, see my discussion of the nationally circulating miscellany *Littell’s Living Age* in chapter 1.

broadside, a staple of working-class literature on both sides of the Atlantic in the eighteenth century and before (Vicinus 9). Printed on one side of “flimsy paper” and sold for a penny or half-penny on the street (9), broadsides were considered disreputable, while the broadsheet format, according to Malcolm Chase, maintained the “journalistic high ground” (34). The papers, therefore, could assert their legitimacy while also making the most of their limited space. The *Northern Star* contained eight pages in each issue with seven vertical columns of text on each page; Douglass’s papers were four pages with eight columns (figures 2.1 and 2.2). Issues typically contained news reports on current political issues (sometimes reprinted from mainstream papers); reports from political meetings; columns from correspondents; a poem, short story, or installment of a novel (most of them reprinted); letters from readers; and advertisements. In most issues, these columns are arranged in a seemingly haphazard manner.

The miscellaneous nature of the papers’ content, particularly their widespread use of reprinting, has prompted some scholars to dismiss that content as “purloined information from other publications” used simply to “fill space rather than to serve any particular redeeming value” (Hutton xvii). Instead of dismissing seemingly random columns, however, it is important to see the format and content of the paper as the main literary source for many readers. Therefore, even trivial content could be seen as “educational tools” and “lessons in literacy” that “supplied...readers with a steady stream

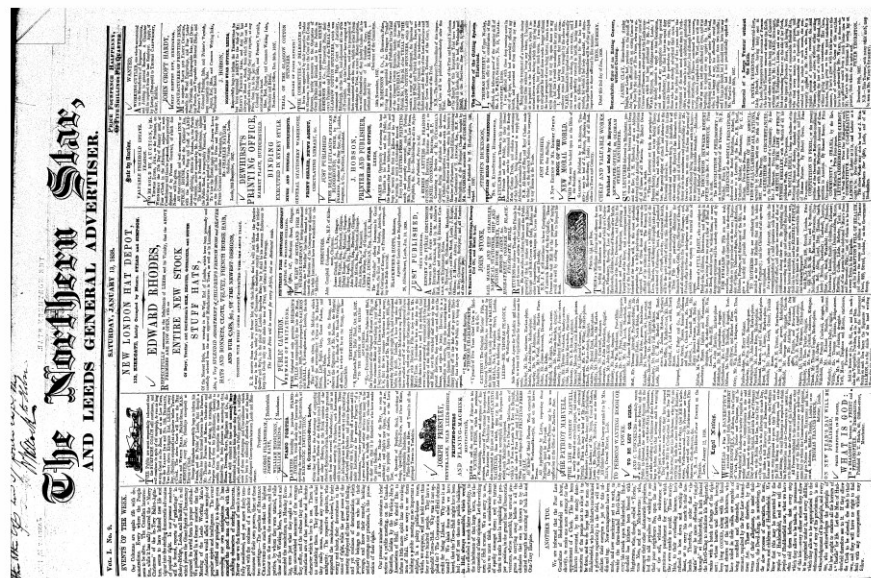


Figure 2.1 Northern Star. Front Page. 13 Jan. 1838. Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition. Web. 3 March 2013.

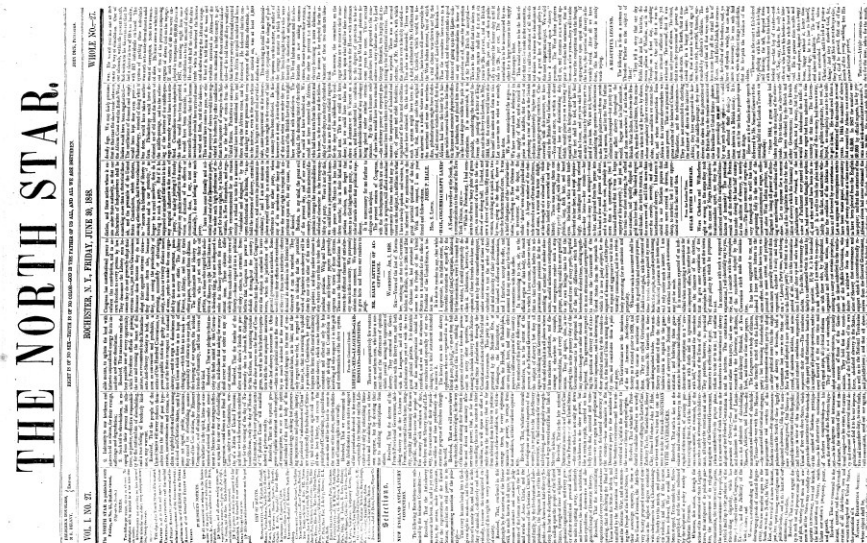


Figure 2.2 North Star. Front Page. 30 June 1848. Gale Cengage 19th Century US Newspapers. Web. 3 March 2013.

of interesting and diverse reading material consumable by a readership of various ages and literacy levels” (McHenry 93).

Many British workers and African Americans were autodidacts and potentially employed communal reading experiences as lessons in literacy, and the *Northern Star* and Douglass’s papers encourage this situation. Rose has asserted that “there is no common standard, no universally recognized borderline separating the literate from the illiterate” in Victorian England (“Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader” 32). Likewise, as McHenry has shown, African American literary societies “encouraged their members to develop different relationships with texts,” meaning that while some black readers “practice[ed] their literacy individually,” others who were semi-literate and illiterate did not, depending instead upon public reading (13). Informal reading communities allowed individuals of all levels of literacy to “read” the content of the papers and to thus absorb the same information as the conventionally literate, leading to “communal knowledge” (McHenry 13).⁴⁵ Individuals reading the *Northern Star* and Douglass’s papers in reading rooms or listening to it being read in a beer hall in indeterminate stages of literacy had the benefit of being in the presence of those who were more advanced.

The columns that best bridged the gap between literacy levels within black and working-class communities were the speeches by O’Connor and Douglass printed verbatim, as well as their articles that contained similar rhetorical strategies. This reveals that O’Connor and Douglass understood that their papers would be read in a communal environment, often out loud, to those who had limited reading skills. Douglass’s many

⁴⁵ As I will discuss further in chapter 3, many opportunities for illiterate and semi-literate blacks to “read” also existed. Considering newsprint in particular, Leonard states that illiterate African Americans could point to the specific columns that they wanted a literate person to read aloud to them (6).

columns employ the elevated rhetoric of his speeches, combining logical and emotional appeals, particularly longer columns addressing the most controversial issues. These columns, when read aloud in the literary societies and reading rooms of the North, as well as in non-sanctioned gatherings in the South, would allow his ideas and fervor to circulate in areas where his body could not.⁴⁶ Many issues of the *Northern Star* included an address by O'Connor—sometimes a reprinted speech, sometimes written specifically for the paper—that, according to Dorothy Thompson, were “clearly intended to be read aloud...limit[ing] any divisive effect which the use of print might have between the literate members of the community and the rest” (52). Pickering provides the example of a shoemaker in Cheltenham visiting a local family’s “humble kitchen” in order for a family member to “read out to him and others” O'Connor’s letter (76). These addresses by O'Connor, as Pickering points out, addressed readers collectively but also could be read as “personal communications” by any individual Chartist, lending themselves to communal and individual reading experiences (77).

While both papers reveal an awareness of illiterate and semi-literate readers, they also provided more sophisticated content for advanced readers, functioning as a “reader” or miscellany when other reading materials were unavailable or too expensive for those seeking to advance their own literacy or teach others (Thompson 219; McHenry 88). Books were often expensive for working people despite the rise of cheap print in Britain and America, and their larger size made them difficult to integrate into the everyday life of a laborer—particularly if that laborer needed to conceal reading materials. Yet the

⁴⁶ In suggesting that Douglass’s papers include content for the semi-literate and illiterate, I disagree with McHenry, who argues that in contrast with earlier black newspapers, Douglass’s papers “assumed” that readers were “skilled and sophisticated readers” (115). While the papers may not be as intent on convincing readers that basic literacy is important, Douglass’s writing has an oral quality that lends itself to communal reading as I argue above.

material primarily available in book form was important for the growth of literacy in working-class and African Americans communities. Emphasizing their editors' belief that "imaginative improvement was linked to political improvement," both papers made the mainstream press and popular literature accessible through reprinting (Murphy 58; McHenry 90). Toward this end, the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers reprinted literary texts in various forms—sometimes the very same authors and texts, particularly British poets with radical sympathies, such as Shelley, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Moore, and Charles Mackay, and American abolitionist poets such as Whittier and Longfellow.⁴⁷ In some cases, the newspapers reprinted the exact same poems: for example, the *Northern Star* reprinted Whittier's "The Reformer" along with excerpts by Charles Mackay and Thomas Moore in its annual "Christmas Garland" column (Dec. 19, 1846, 3), while in 1848, the *North Star* reprinted "The Reformer" in its weekly "Poetry" column (Aug. 4, 1848, 4); that same year, poems by Mackay and Moore also appeared in the column. These reprinted literary texts, in transatlantic circulation, allowed black and working-class readers to expand their literacy despite their inability to purchase multiple books and periodicals.

O'Connor, Douglass, and their coworkers, in choosing literary texts to review and reprint, showcased their own voracious reading habits and transferred "the energy and

⁴⁷ For these British poets in the *Northern Star*, see "A Christmas Garland" (Dec. 23, 1843, including writing by Leigh Hunt and Charles Mackay), a review and extracts from Shelley's *Queen Mab* (Oct. 28, 1848), and Moore, quoted in "Address of the Irish Chartists of Manchester..." (May 29, 1841). For Whittier and Longfellow in the *Northern Star*, see Whittier, "A Dream of Summer" (July 3, 1847); Longfellow, "The Arsenal at Springfield" (July 4, 1846). For British poets in the *North Star*, see "Equality. From Shelley's Revolt of Islam" (Feb. 8, 1850), Hunt's "Summer" (July 21, 1848), Mackay's "Feast of the Despots" (Dec. 22, 1848), and Moore's "Song" (March 17, 1848). For Whittier and Longfellow in the *North Star*, see, among others, Whittier, "Yorktown" (Feb. 11, 1848) and Longfellow, "The Slave's Dream" (March 17, 1848). Additionally, Ivy G. Wilson notes that texts by well-known authors were often printed anonymously, "perhaps a sign itself about the kinds of works assumed to be known by black reading audiences" (136).

content of their self-study” to their readers (Murphy 21). By documenting their own reading in the content they choose for reprinting, O’Connor and Douglass constructed their papers as models of radical reading, providing guidance for what titles to read and, more importantly, how to read them. To this end, literary reprints were accompanied by literary criticism that judged texts based on their representation of the working classes or African Americans instead of their literary merit. Literary reprints and criticism were meant to cultivate higher literacy levels among working-class and black readers, leading them to become authors themselves. The goal of working-class and black authorship was one that O’Connor and Douglass sought to model through their own reading and writing, but also through readers’ submissions printed beside reprints and literary reviews, which asserted their legitimacy and literary worth. The cultivation of a more sophisticated minority readership through reprinting miscellaneous literary texts was ultimately an attempt to create minority writers who, like Douglass and O’Connor, could counter-represent the working classes and African Americans as intelligent groups worthy of social and political equality.

The *Northern Star*, as well as other Chartist papers, sought to shape the literary taste of working-class readers, ultimately encouraging them to read mainstream literary texts through a subversive lens. As Murphy states, Chartist editors read “established” authors and published those that fit into their value system: “By offering new readings of both the lives and works of established authors, they made these writers serve working-class ends and speak working-class values” (3). This resulted in a working-class canon that was “half old and half new, made up of both works valuable to their class exclusively and those taken from the middle-class canon” (53). Murphy argues that working-class

papers developed literary values distinct from the mainstream press and stated these values explicitly (2). Through weekly literary reviews, working-class editors employed literature to “establish an ideology for their class,” meaning that “every act of evaluating...was an act of defining and promoting a working-class value system” in order to “empower their class” (3). This cultivation of a self-consciously working-class literary “programme” corresponds with the encouragement of what Murphy calls the “Second Literacy,” in which the autodidact no longer reads whatever is available, but seeks out titles “worth reading” (17). Editors intervened in how these texts should be read by working-class readers to encouraged the growth of politicized literacy (53). This is certainly apparent in the *Northern Star*, which Murphy identifies as the best lens through which the Chartist view of literature can be understood (56). Almost every issue of the paper had several columns—sometimes an entire page—devoted to literary criticism and reprints (56).⁴⁸ While the *Northern Star* never reprinted fiction substantially, the rise of the political novel in the mid-1840s caused then-editor Julian Harney to more thoroughly review popular fiction. In a review spanning ten issues, Harney critiqued Benjamin Disraeli’s *Corningsby* in what Murphy calls a “literary duel” between Chartist and Tory politics (85). As Murphy asserts, Harney, while defaming the novel and its author’s politics, nonetheless writes with the assumption that readers of the paper should, like Harney, be reading the novel and others like it (86). Therefore, the paper instructed working-class readers how to hone their critical reading skills, engaging in mainstream literacy while simultaneously disproving mainstream assessments of the working classes as illiterate.

⁴⁸ Most often, page 3 was devoted to literary reprints, reviews, and publication announcements.

Literary criticism was intended not only to guide readers' choice of texts and means of interpreting them, but also to inspire their own writing, which then became evidence for the equality of working people. The *Northern Star* included poetry by working-class authors printed alongside poems by established mainstream authors (Murphy 3).⁴⁹ Poetry, the favored literary genre of Chartist periodicals, was seen as an important means of literacy education, exemplified by night schools that taught adult students to read poetry and then write their own (Vicus 109-110).⁵⁰ In the 1830s, Chartist poetry was mainly written in response to political events, while aesthetics were "secondary" (Murphy 108). Vicus similarly states that working-class poets faced the difficulty of "combin[ing] literary enthusiasm and political beliefs" (107). This can be seen from the titles of some poems the *Northern Star* printed during its first year, such as "Pliant of the Wandering Irish Peasant," "Lines on the Conviction of the Glasgow Cotton Spinners," and "The Slaves' Address to British Females" (20 Jan. 1838, 7; 3 Feb. 1838, 7; 17 Feb. 1838, 7). However, the *Northern Star* clearly had some aesthetic standards for the poetry it printed. A notice was printed in the February 10, 1838 issue that a poem entitled "Lines on the New Poor Law" had been rejected because, though the lines "[did] credit to the Author's feelings," they would "scarce bear publication" (4). Beside readers' submissions that did "bear" publication, the *Northern Star* reprinted classic British

⁴⁹ I discuss specific examples of this in the second part of the chapter. While other Chartist periodicals of the 1840s and '50s followed popular trends and published working-class authored fiction, Murphy says that the *Northern Star* "lagged surprisingly behind other Chartist periodicals" in this (94). Meanwhile, in the late 1840s and early 1850s, O'Connor's protégé Ernest Jones "elevated" fiction in his newspaper, the *People's Paper*. Dickens and Stowe, interestingly, appear alongside fiction by working-class authors, including Jones himself (Jones 95).

⁵⁰ Vicus provides the example of Thomas Cooper's Shakespearean Chartist Association in Leicester: students took classes on politics and poetry, then produced their own six-penny volume of poems (109). These courses were closely linked to the association's coffeehouse and newspaper collection, which, thanks to their coverage of politics and reprinting of poetry, could provide basic materials for the students' education (110).

authors like Shakespeare (5 July 1840), poems from mainstream papers like *Punch*, and abolitionist American poets like Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, and Bryant (5 July 1845; Murphy 126). In this way, the paper attempted to establish the continuity between the poetry of workers and established literary figures, asserting their similar literary abilities.

The Black press made reprinting choices using a similar rationale, considering the range of texts reprinted in the context of Douglass's papers. Many of these literary texts were British, and most content by well-known authors was reprinted from British and American periodicals and books.⁵¹ Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Coleridge, and Felicia Hemans appeared "regularly," but the most striking example of Douglass's methodology is his reprinting of *Bleak House* in its entirety during 1852-3 (McHenry 124). Not yet at the end of its serial publication in Britain, *Bleak House* was soon serialized in America by *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and the anti-slavery Boston *Commonwealth* before *Frederick Douglass' Paper* picked it up (Hack 733).⁵² While prior to this Douglass had reprinted mainly poetry and very few short stories and fictional excerpts, his paper was the only one to complete its serialization of the novel despite some readers' complaints that it was taking space away from content more pertinent to the black community—including discussions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁵³ While the *Commonwealth* had explicitly connected British class concerns to the issue of slavery, Douglass did not; instead, he

⁵¹ Much of the time, the newspaper does not include specific citations for reprinted material. There are some reprints that include both author and citation information, such as Whittier's "Yorktown," which was reprinted from the National Era, an abolitionist paper (Feb. 11, 1848); others are anonymous but include citation information, such as "The Voice and the Pen" from the *Dublin Nation* (March 31, 1848).

⁵² While *Harper's* had an official agreement with Dickens, Douglass did not; therefore, installments were a bit behind those appearing in *Harper's* (McHenry 125). Interestingly, in the same issue that Douglass announces receiving the *Harper's* issue with the first installment of the novel in it, he also announces that his paper will begin publishing the installments in the next issue (*FDP*, 1 April 1852, 4). This shows the continuity between Douglass's own reading and reprinted content of his paper.

⁵³ In the 26 May 1852 issue, a letter from "A Syracuse Friend" asks, "Could not the space occupied by Dickens' *Bleak House* be better occupied?"

connected Dickens and Stowe as reformers through fiction, providing an indirect connection between transatlantic concerns of class and race (Hack 733, 739). Despite the novel's seeming distance from the concerns of antebellum African Americans and "racial specificity," Hack notes that it "becomes incorporated into the discourse of the paper" during its serialization, and serves the purpose of illustrating the literary knowledge of the black community (740-1). Therefore, Douglass "repurposes" *Bleak House* for a black readership, employing the novel as part of his politicized literary agenda (741). By placing the novel within the context of his paper, he makes it a part the scene of reading he carefully constructs for his readers. Giving sophisticated readers access to a popular novel they might otherwise never have read, Douglass subtly shows readers how British fiction can speak to African American concerns while also allowing the inclusion of the novel in a "colored" newspaper to represent African Americans as a literary people.

The self-conscious critical lens for examining established texts and authors employed by the *Northern Star* is also apparent in Douglass's papers, as they encouraged the reading of mainstream texts through a subversive lens. *Frederick Douglass' Paper* included a weekly column entitled "Literary Notices" that reviewed mainstream miscellanies, new editions of established authors, and new fiction.⁵⁴ Like the *Northern Star* and other Chartist papers, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* did not limit its praise to texts authored by the paper's main readership, but also wrote glowing reviews of white-authored texts meant to support abolitionism and black equality. This is most apparent in Douglass's "championing" of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from its publication in 1852 onward, despite criticism from the paper's contributors and readers, most notably, Martin

⁵⁴ For example, the "Literary Notices" column in the Jan. 15, 1852 issue provides the contents of the latest issues of *Littell's Living Age*, a nationally-circulating miscellany (see my discussion of it in chapter 1) as well as a glowing recommendation for it (2).

Delany (Levine, “African American Literary Nationalism” 126). While praising *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the paper also encouraged black readers to criticize it and to contribute their own writing to the paper, thus “nurturing” black writers (Levine, “African American Literary Nationalism” 127; McHenry 115). Slave narratives, poems, and Douglass’s own short story, “The Heroic Slave,” appear beside chapters from *Bleak House* and debates about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, illustrating how Douglass subtly resisted the representation of blacks in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* even while critically supporting the novel.⁵⁵ Placing black-authored texts beside those by whites, Douglass encourages critical reading instead of passive acceptance of the messages of mainstream print.

Douglass also supported black poetry in his papers in order to assert the literary ability of black writers, which supported his overall goal of spreading literacy as a means of achieving equality. The black poet James Monroe Whitfield appears a number of times in the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, including a laudatory poem entitled “The North Star” (“Poetry,” Dec. 21, 1849, 4). Like the working-class poetry in the *Northern Star*, Whitfield’s poems appeared beside texts by well-known American and British authors: for example, his poem “To A— H—,” an account of reading the classics, appears before a poem by Charles Mackay in the “Poetry” column of the April 12, 1850 issue of the *North Star*. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper sent her *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* for publication, review, and promotion, illustrating that by the mid-fifties, black authors were regarding the paper as an appropriate venue for their writing (McHenry 118-20). Additionally, Douglass not only

⁵⁵ This is the subject of the second chapter of Levine’s *Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (1997), in which he explores the complications of the debate over *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Daniel Hack adds to this discussion by examining how the serialization of *Bleak House* fits into this debate, particularly considered in context with “The Heroic Slave.”

solicited but reviewed African American texts, condoning a political and imaginative focus for writers, legitimizing their texts as African American literature, and creating a readership for new black writers (McHenry 114). The practice of reviewing and reprinting mainstream, white-authored texts beside those by emerging black writers reveals Douglass's advancement of the "creative parity between black and white writers," suggesting the "equality of their literary, cultural, and artistic pursuits" (116). Black-authored texts ultimately define the scene of reading Douglass constructs within his papers, representing the racial equality of African Americans, but do so more strikingly when compared with reprinted texts in the context of the paper.

Clearly, both papers illustrate that a thriving literary community existed among the working classes and African Americans in the antebellum period, but the underground strategies I have discussed for circulation and reading made it impossible for the publishers to know exactly how many people read their papers—and pose the same problem for scholars now. Communal reading strategies became a conundrum for the publishers of both papers. When the papers advocated these strategies, they spread literacy, advancing their political causes and potentially increasing the papers' readerships; yet they also knew that these readers were not necessarily going to purchase a subscription, making it difficult to raise money to actually publish the paper.

This was initially less of a problem for the *Northern Star*. In its early years, the paper was not only the most successful Chartist newspaper in terms of circulation numbers, but was also the only one to make a profit (D. Thompson 46). Because of its stamped status, records exist of how many issues were printed and shipped each week. Thompson reports that at the paper's peak in 1839, when Chartism ignited, as many as

60,000 copies were distributed to agents each week; on average that year, about 40,000 were distributed each week—astonishing numbers for any paper of this era (52).⁵⁶ In 1838, the *Northern Star* itself reported that, contrary to a local survey printed in the Tory-controlled Leeds *Mercury*, which deliberately left the paper out, the paper was distributing 90,000 copies per week and that none of these were thrown away (*NS* 27 Jan. 1838, 4). Commenting on their high distribution and the mainstream press's supposed bitterness about it, the *Northern Star* writes, "We have no desire to lessen the circulation of any single Newspaper in existence, but we have a great desire to see the people, generally, well-versed in that political information which Newspapers are, now, the most ordinary vehicles" (4). Additionally, because the readership of mainstream papers had not subsided, the article continues, "We are forced to the conclusion that the *Northern Star* is principally supported by new readers... 'Tis a sign that people are awakening from their lethargy and are seeking an acquaintance with their rights" (4). Because of distribution via agents and the communal reading situations that Chartist papers encouraged, it is impossible to know exactly how many people actually read the paper each week. Patricia Anderson notes, however, that a ratio of five readers to every issue has been generally accepted for "popular" periodicals of the time (3). This is a more modest number than the *Northern Star* itself suggested: it estimated seven readers to each copy, meaning that 63,700 people were "deriving information" for the paper each week (27 Jan. 1838, 4). On the other hand, Murphy estimates that the paper could have had as many as 20-30 readers per copy, if the frequent procuring of used copies is considered (11). Whatever the actual numbers may have been, the paper made enough of a profit in its early days to employ

⁵⁶ These high numbers were not stable, however. In 1840, circulation had fallen to 18,700 on average; throughout the 1840s, average circulation was below 8,700 per day (Murphy 11). As a point of comparison, the London *Times* circulated 18,500 per day in 1840, 23,000 in 1844, and 40,000 in 1851 (King).

agents, correspondents, and localized organizers, as well as to support imprisoned Chartists and their families (Thompson 48). In the 1840s, however, as government crackdowns on Chartist leadership took their toll, general disappointment about the failure of the People's Charter to find a voice in Parliament settled into radical working-class populations, and O'Connor himself suffered from a lack of funds and ill health, the paper began to experience more financial difficulties. After 1848, when the national Chartist movement fragmented into smaller radical movements, the paper floundered and finally ceased publication in 1852 (Jones 17).

The difficulties that the *Northern Star* faced in the early 1850s had plagued Douglass's papers from the start. While the *Northern Star's* circulation was initially very high, the *North Star* struggled to find paying subscribers on the national level, no doubt because the amount of territory to be covered was much larger. While Douglass began the paper debt-free, thanks to the British donation, a mailing list of 700 was not adequate to keep the paper solvent (Foner 85). By 1848, he had mortgaged his house, was lecturing in addition to editing to fund the paper, and was issuing pleas for subscriptions in the paper itself (85). In addition, fundraisers were planned by black literary societies to keep the paper in print (87). The paper's financial salvation was ultimately Julia Griffiths, who took charge of accounts in the summer of 1848 and doubled the circulation of the paper from 2,000 per week to over 4,000 per week (87).⁵⁷ The paper was financially solvent and making money by 1851, but two years later it was in debt again primarily because of delinquent subscribers (88). Douglass's financial difficulties were not unusual for the Black press: *Freedom's Journal* and Samuel Cornish's short-lived follow-up *The Rights*

⁵⁷ While this circulation number seems low compared to the *Northern Star*, it is actually admirable for its time and place; for instance, 4,500 was a high circulation number in the 1830s (Mott 202).

of *All* had included pleas for an increase of subscriptions (Levine, “Circulating the Nation” 24), and Cornish’s salary for editing *The Colored American* was raised by the Dorcas Society, a women’s literacy group (Vogel 44). Despite financial difficulties and sometimes low subscription numbers, the impact of Douglass’s papers was far-reaching.⁵⁸ For example, the first black newspapers to appear on the west coast in the 1860s explicitly addressed their indebtedness to Douglass and portrayed themselves as part of a lineage of black print that included *Freedom’s Journal*, *The Colored American*, and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (Wilson 142).

While many scholars continue to assume the widespread illiteracy of African Americans and British workers in the antebellum period, these papers tell a dramatically different story. Obsessed with literacy—particularly with the portrayal of marginalized readers as literate and the political implications of literacy for disenfranchised groups—the *Northern Star* and Douglass’s papers built upon radical print traditions in order to reach a national readership of varying literacy levels. These papers encouraged the growth of literacy, basic and advanced: the ability to read, but also the development of class- and race-conscious reading strategies that allowed readers to recognize and respond to discourse being disseminated through the middle-class controlled publishing industry. In doing so, they make scenes of underground reading material, documenting and disseminating modes of radical reading intended to bring about liberation through print. I will now show specifically how both papers construct these scenes by intervening in the mainstream press and counter-representing their readers by engaging in dominant

⁵⁸ Frankie Hutton states that the agent system and “shared-copy distribution” mean that circulation numbers for Black papers were “probably considerably wider” than the figures suggest (xv).

discourses that sought to keep African Americans and the British working classes from social equality and political power.

II. Radical Self-Representation and Strategies of Reprinting in the *Northern Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*

The Chartist and Black presses employed similar distribution strategies and encouraged similar reading strategies because they both represented disenfranchised groups alienated from participation in the mainstream cultures and presses of Britain and America by ideological differences. Despite this alienation, however, both presses were closely related to mainstream print which, because of the convention of reprinting, looked similar in Britain and America. Like American mainstream papers, which freely borrowed columns from each other and from British papers, British mainstream papers also employed reprinting, if to a lesser degree. It is no surprise, then, that the Chartist and Black presses would mimic this convention. The most striking aspect of the reprinting that occurs in Chartist and Black papers is their borrowing from mainstream papers despite the ideological differences between them. Instead of simply replicating problematic representations of African Americans and the British working classes found in mainstream print, however, the Chartist and Black presses situate articles and excerpts from mainstream papers carefully within each newspaper issue, subtly instructing readers how to critically read mainstream print and to respond to its essentialist stereotyping of blacks and workers. In doing so, both presses provide a context for black and working-class writers to find their voices, counter-representing themselves in a manner that simultaneously references and undermines the mainstream press. The transatlantic reprint industry that carried technological print innovations and the products of those innovations

across the Atlantic shaped not only the mainstream presses of Britain and America, but the radical presses, as well.

While many close parallels between the Chartist and Black Presses exist, as I have shown above, there remains a lack of scholarship exploring their use of reprinting to provide, on one hand, free content for their papers but also, on the other hand, to immerse readers with limited literacy and economic resources in the mainstream print culture that overtly influenced popular political opinion. Recent scholarship has centralized the role of reprinting in mainstream American literary culture—McGill, for instance, has shown how reprinting redefines the work of Hawthorne and Melville—and has also investigated how British fiction has influenced black writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and Hannah Crafts.⁵⁹ Yet scholars have paid little attention to how what McGill calls the “culture” of reprinting influenced radical print in Britain and America, giving groups that have been assumed illiterate by dominant cultures of the past and present access to mainstream print while also teaching them how to respond to it critically. To illustrate this important source of underground literacy for these groups, I argue that beneath the surface of mainstream print, there existed a more complex strategy of transatlantic reprinting, a more nuanced textual exchange between radicals in Britain and America that depended upon the mainstream print culture of both countries while simultaneously undermining it. I will look specifically at the *Northern Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* during periods of acute political upheaval to show how the papers employ reprinting in the same way: both reprint article excerpts from the mainstream press that vilify their readers in order to refute these representations and to provide a context for self-representation in the form of original writing.

⁵⁹ I discuss McGill at length in chapter 1; I discuss Crafts and reprinting in chapter 3.

Scholars of the Black and Chartist presses have noted the similarities between these papers and their mainstream counterparts. Aled Jones has noted how Chartist publications looked similar to mainstream publications in format because they “took advantage” of the same innovations in print technology (3-4). But these similarities go beyond mere appearance: Jones goes on to say that the content of radical working-class publications reflected mainstream popular trends such as romanticism, melodrama, and sensational fiction (5). Similarly, Ian Haywood suggests that radical publishers “appropriated more and more of the dominant culture within their rapidly expanding counter-public sphere” (114). Beginning in the 1830s, as Peter Murphy has shown, this appropriation began to take the form of reprinting: radical papers published “long excerpts from other works, and even, on occasion, ...republish[ed] entire works” (50). Similarly, the Black press, like mainstream American papers of the antebellum era, employed reprinting in the form of news reports and literary texts, some reprinted in excerpt, some in entirety.

Despite their use of mainstream print, radical papers did not accept and reprint the messages of the mainstream press uncritically. While some scholars have interpreted the influence of the mainstream press as a reproduction of the very social hierarchies radical movements were attempting to reform, and therefore dismiss the transgressive potential of this influence, others have argued for a more nuanced interpretation of the print relationship between mainstream and radical cultures. Patricia Anderson asserts that the influence of mainstream culture “by no means signaled the passive acculturation” of radical readers; the reading of mainstream titles was “not a process of wholesale repression or replacement” of radical values, but instead a means of potential inspiration

for the expression of those values (4). Yet Anderson, while acknowledging that the influence of mainstream print does not equal social control, nonetheless concedes that the choice to consume mainstream print equals radical readers' "consent" to the "values embodied in these publications" (6). While I do not suggest that black and working class readers always read mainstream print transgressively, or that they were never influenced by its values, I argue that the *Northern Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reveal, through their reprinting, that consumption does not equal consent but instead becomes a means of strategic reading that accepts some messages and rejects others according to radical values.⁶⁰ Since abolitionism nor Chartism was interested in cultural revolution, but instead in reforming American and British political systems according to inclusive democratic principles, there are moments when the *Northern Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* accept mainstream values. For instance, as I will later discuss, both papers accept mainstream definitions of respectability in counter-representations—but the portrayal of these values often reverses dominant conceptions of them. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Carla L. Peterson argue that the rhetoric of Douglass's papers illustrates Michel Foucault's notion of counterdiscourse in that it employs a "variety of other voices...designed to subvert the official monologic discourse of the dominant class," forcing a dialogue between mainstream and radical ideas (74). This concept of a variety of voices speaking within one context captures the nuances of how the *Northern Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* intervene in mainstream discourse. Neither unquestionably accepting or rejecting mainstream values, the papers instead assimilate them into a

⁶⁰ See my discussion of hegemony, power, and consent in the introduction.

discourse of their own, a process that, according to Leonard, involves the “contrasting roles” of “passivity and self-assertion, conformity and defiance” (32).⁶¹

The self-assertion and defiance of the Chartist and Black presses becomes evident in their combative rhetoric that portrays the mainstream press as an enemy institution. This “embattled, even persecuted” tone resulted from mainstream papers’ negative portrayal of nearly every aspect of radical political movements—their papers, leaders, followers, and meetings (Jones 9). The Chartist press, which already had animosity toward the mainstream press left over from the Unstamped Wars, was accused of being inflammatory and dangerous by the mainstream press, which in turn influenced national opinion of the movement. This was evident during O’Connor’s sentencing for seditious libel: the court, echoing the rhetoric of the mainstream press, accused O’Connor of “pander[ing] to the base passions of a profligate and a little-thinking and reckless class of people” before sentencing him to prison for eighteen months (Jones 13). These sentiments reveal essentialist stereotypes about working-class readers that caused the Chartist press to define itself “dialectically” to the mainstream press, “reject[ing] its politics and [seeking] to resist its popular appeal” (7). As the January 27, 1838 issue of the *Northern Star* attests, the mainstream press in Leeds refused to acknowledge the popularity of the radical paper by excluding its impressive circulation numbers from an annual report of local papers and instead using a Scottish paper of the same name with a much smaller circulation as a stand-in, deliberately making the *Northern Star* appear insignificant in the local print market (4).

⁶¹ Here I am using the term “assimilation” as Michel de Certeau defines it in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. I discuss this in more detail in the introduction. Haywood also employs the term this way when he states that working-class newspapers included advertisements for problematic publications because editors had faith that “readers could choose to assimilate the usable elements of the dominant culture without fear of contamination” (116).

This blatant opposition also characterizes the mainstream press's reaction to the Black press in America, as they often condemned and actively worked to suppress it (Leonard 70). When Douglass began the *North Star*, the *New York Herald* "urged the people of Rochester to throw Douglass' printing press into the lake and exile the author to Canada" (Foner 84); the *Albany Dispatch* called Douglass the "n-----r pet of the British abolitionists" and warned Rochesterians that the paper would be a "serious detriment" to the community (qtd. in Foner 85). Like the mainstream British press, the mainstream American press combined its criticism of the radical press with degradation of its leaders and readers, meaning that the Black press, like the Chartist press, sought to "combat continued degradation and allegations that blacks were inferior and to repel hegemonic legalities that ensured they would be kept down in America" (Hutton xiv). From its early days, McHenry states, the black press sought to fight "discrimination against the free black population" in the form of "misleading representation" from the mainstream press, whose "erroneous and incomplete reports...led to inaccuracies about black people becoming lodged in the white imagination" (91). Both the Chartist and Black presses, then, were engaged in print warfare with mainstream presses over representation that conflated the identities of blacks and the working classes with the papers themselves, making counter-representation the focus of the papers.

The battle over representation had high stakes for the Black and Chartist presses. Because the public identities of African Americans and the working classes depended upon representation in the press, their literacy took on added significance. African-American and working-class readers were becoming consumers of an increasingly inexpensive popular print industry, much of which actively worked against the social and

political equality of these groups. This placed their literacy in a contest between radical political leaders and editors and the mainstream print industry: from the viewpoint of radical editors, if black and working-class literacy went unmediated, group consciousness could be lost, and along with it, the power of political agitation.⁶² Additionally, the future of papers like the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers depended upon gaining a readership, and they realized that mainstream papers were their ideological and marketplace rivals. The mainstream press, which ironically portrayed blacks and the working classes as unintelligent and illiterate, nonetheless found their literacy a threat and an opportunity—a threat because literacy meant increased social power, an opportunity because that power could be used against them. Therefore, the battle for representation that both the *Northern Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* waged against the mainstream press was essentially a battle for readers, and the battlefield became the content of each issue.

Both papers combine reprinted texts with material that counters the negative representation of their readers found in those texts in order to engage in battle with mainstream print. At first, their content appears miscellaneous, but when read back-to-back, the issues coalesce around current news items regarding their political causes, most reprinted from mainstream papers. Usually located toward the front of the issue, these reprinted news items are followed, in the same issue and subsequent issues, with columns that directly or indirectly refute them. These refutations, in the form of editorials, speeches, correspondence, poetry, fiction, and, in *The Northern Star*, occasional illustrations and portraits, reveal that both papers understood the power of the press in

⁶² This sense of print warfare between radical and mainstream papers illustrates Antonio Gramsci's notion of multiple hegemonies that I discuss in the introduction.

terms of political representation and its significant role in appealing to, sustaining, and raising the political consciousness of their readers. Harnessing this power, so often employed against the Chartist and Abolitionist movements by mainstream newsprint on both sides of the Atlantic, the editors used reprinting as the impetus of print warfare. This sense of discursive warfare against representations in the mainstream press is evident in both papers particularly during times of increased political action against the British working classes and African Americans. To illustrate the papers' similar strategies of reprinting and self-representation, I will focus on two moments of increased anti-democratic political action: early 1838 in the *Northern Star* and early 1852 in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, moments when both papers strategically intervened in negative representations by exposing the fallacy of these images and replacing them with positive self-representations. By doing so, they employ and model strategies of underground reading, assimilating mainstream print into radical ideological frameworks.

The *Northern Star* and the Glasgow Spinners' Trial, January and February 1838

Political events that directly impacted the working classes were a major motivation for their purchasing and reading of the *Northern Star*.⁶³ In fact, agitation surrounding the People's Charter was O'Connor's major impetus for beginning the *Northern Star*. The Charter was still being drafted in London when O'Connor, William Hill, and Joshua Hobson began publishing the *Northern Star* in November 1837, but another event—obscure in the pages of history but of critical importance to trade unionism in Britain in the late 1830s—was taking place: the trial of five leaders of the

⁶³ Murphy states that working-class readers were motivated to purchase and read texts—newspapers and others—because of “issues and events” (10). The peak circulation numbers of working-class periodicals coincide with moments of increased political action (11).

Glasgow Spinners' Union arrested during a strike and charged with conspiracy and the murder of an operative shot, probably by a policeman, during the strike. The charges of conspiracy and of dangerous and unlawful "combination" made the trial a top news item, with mainstream newspapers across Britain borrowing the inflammatory rhetoric of the prosecution to vilify the spinners and trade union leaders in general. As Albert D. Pionke suggests, the anti-union mainstream press, of Tory and Whig orientation, focused their attention on the charge of conspiracy, "transforming the otherwise legal Glasgow Spinners' Union into a conspiratorial secret society" and "distancing as dangerous others not only the defendants, but the members of the spinners' unions and even the entire working class" (28; 31). In addition to the Charter, for which the Chartist movement was named, the spinners' trial and the guilty verdict issued in February 1838 became an inciting incident for Chartism because labor organizers and sympathizers saw it as a "planned attack on the whole working-class movement" that was sanctioned by national and local governments, Whig and Tory, who appeared to be allied against the working classes (Thompson 22, 28). Of particular concern for Chartist leaders was the mainstream press's representation of union leaders as villainous and the workers in their unions as uneducated dupes: *Blackwood's Magazine*, for example, which in March of 1838 printed an extensive article supposedly exposing the inner workings of trade unions, bemoaned in particular the educated union men who could use their faculties to persuade common operatives to join their nefarious secret societies, portraying a sinister union leadership preying upon ignorant and uninformed union members.

The question of how working-class leaders should respond to this crisis divided them early in the movement, making the spinners' trial potentially disastrous. When

Radical MP Daniel O'Connell, whom O'Connor regarded as a faux radical, proposed a parliamentary investigation into the trial and trade unions in particular, O'Connor disagreed with Lovett of the London Working Men's Association over reliance upon Parliament to intervene on behalf of the spinners and saw the investigation as an excuse for more union busting (Pickering 74). While Lovett took a paid position in the enquiry, supposedly to "better facilitate" it, O'Connor denounced the investigation as a "vehicle for compromise" and a threat to the Chartist movement (74-5).⁶⁴ The *Northern Star*, in response to the mainstream press and moderate Chartists like Lovett, regarded the spinners' trial as a crucial juncture for the future of the paper and Chartism and responded forcefully.

Standing in support of trade unions and union members alike, the *Northern Star* faced the challenge of exposing the demonizing rhetoric of the mainstream press and defending the "Glasgow Spinners," as they came to be known, as victims of the British government's failure to represent the working classes. The stakes were high: unions and other working-class organizations were becoming the main organs of support for the People's Charter; if the mainstream press effectively used the Glasgow Spinners story to break up unions and otherwise cause divisiveness among the working classes, the progress that had been made toward political enfranchisement would be lost. Early in 1838, the paper took up this challenge directly by addressing the spinners' trial, but also indirectly by undermining the mainstream press's reliability, particularly regarding the leadership of pro-labor organizations. In the early months of 1838, this combination

⁶⁴ O'Connor called Lovett and his allies "London sham radicals and their parliamentary pets," instigating a battle over whose working-class status was more authentic: Lovett had long distrusted O'Connor because he was not by birth a "working man" (qtd. in Pickering 75). O'Connor now turned the tables on him and accused him and his followers of not doing any "real work" for Chartism (75).

approach can be seen in a serialized account of the trial subsidized by the Glasgow Spinners Union and written specifically for the *Northern Star*, a rousing address by O'Connor defending the spinners, a letter written by one of the imprisoned spinners, a poem written by readers about the spinners, an illustration of the spinners, and multiple accusations of the unreliability of the Tory and Whig controlled mainstream press, complete with reprinted excerpts from the papers.

Before the guilty verdict was announced in February, and while the mainstream press was vilifying the spinners, readers of the *Northern Star* were inundated with evidence against the trustworthiness of the mainstream press—evidence printed near the serialized account of the spinner's trial. In the 20 January issue alone, two columns address this untrustworthiness. "The Leeds Meeting and the Leeds *Mercury*" accuses the Tory paper of negatively portraying Chartist leaders at the previous week's large public gathering, reprinting an excerpt from the *Mercury* that states the leaders are "taking infinite pains to get their necks into the halter" (5). Editor William Hill responds directly to this quote, defending the leaders by smugly stating, "We recollect the hacknied [sic] maxim—no more trite than true—that the language of action is much more powerful than that of words" (5). The phrase "language of action" is important as a response to the *Mercury's* criticism, as it claims the moral high ground for the Chartists and Chartist print, unifying the two, while making the Tory *Mercury* appear to be all talk and no action. The same issue also reprints a letter from Chartist agitator Richard Oastler to the *Mercury* accusing the editors, "You have so often mutilated my communications and misrepresented them, and at times even refused them insertion"; the letter concludes with the admonishing statement, "free discussion is the only safe path to truth" (7). This letter,

in response to the *Mercury's* defamation and misrepresentation of Oastler and initially printed in that paper, works in tandem with the previous column to underscore the *Mercury's* hostility toward working-class agitation and their willingness to slander Chartist leaders, encouraging readers to compare this untrustworthiness with the mainstream press's reporting on the spinners' trial.

Meanwhile, during the early months of 1838, all reports of the ongoing insurrection against the British in Canada, for which the *Northern Star* was sympathetic, are reprinted directly from American papers, with accompanying statements that the London papers cannot be trusted. Correspondent Bronterre O'Brien adds to this distrust in his column about the insurrection printed in the 27 January issue, stating, "Do not believe, Gentlemen, the versions, or rather perversions, of Canadian affairs published by the London daily press; they cannot, for an instant, be depended on" (4). O'Brien's statement reveals that the *Northern Star's* reprinted reporting of the Canada insurgency parallels their coverage of the spinners. Because the spinners' trial was taking place in Scotland, the *Northern Star* had direct access to the trial—Feargus O'Connor attended, as did other Chartist leaders—and was able to label columns about the spinners "reported exclusively for the *Northern Star*" so that readers would know that the columns were not reprinted from the untrustworthy mainstream press. But because the Canadian insurgency was taking place across the Atlantic where the Chartist press had no official correspondents, the *Northern Star* specified that all news of these events was reprinted from American papers. This meant that Hill had access to several American papers and viewed them as more reliable than mainstream British newsprint.

After the spinners were pronounced guilty and sentenced to seven years' transportation, the 10 February issue connects distrust of the mainstream press directly to the spinners' trial. The article "Beware False Reports!," located on the front page, asserts that Henry Robinson, a Chartist printer, is the only official printer and publisher of the trial because he has been chosen by the Committee of Delegates representing the trades of Glasgow. Because the Committee reports facts directly to Robinson and he alone has "possession" of them, all other reports are to be considered suspect (1). Interestingly, this column also functions as an advertisement: the announcement that Robinson's reporting on the case is available for purchase concludes the column. Taken together, these disparagements of the mainstream press's reliability concerning Chartism in general and the spinners in particular clearly define the *Northern Star's* antagonistic attitude toward British mainstream newsprint and discourage readers from trusting their accounts—even though the paper depends upon these accounts to provide content.

In addition to defaming the mainstream press, January and February issues of the paper simultaneously assert the dignity, intelligence, and moral superiority of the spinners and the working classes in general. This occurs in several ways, all of which involve counter-representation. O'Connor's address, appearing in the 27 January issue, initiates this by not only announcing the verdict of the trial, but also taking control of representing the trial through rousing courtroom-style rhetoric. Written to "the radicals of England, Ireland, and Scotland," the epistolary-style column begins by addressing readers as "freemen," highlighting the shared goal of political freedom among radicals throughout the British Isles (4). O'Connor introduces the case with gravity, insinuating that it is a life or death issue for workingmen: the case, he writes, is "a subject of most

vital importance—a subject in which is involved every consideration dear to you” (4). Introducing readers to the serialized account of the trial, O’Connor asks readers to take a “calm, manly and dispassionate view of the case,” placing himself in the position of a lawyer talking to a jury: “You will read the whole trial, and after deliberation, I have no doubt you will act as becomes freemen” (4). Of course, like a defense lawyer, O’Connor does not actually want his “jury” of readers to be dispassionate, as he has made clear in the opening lines of the address, but instead to be emotionally invested in the spinners as individuals and as a group. Yet in positioning himself as lawyer and readers as jurors after the verdict of the trial has already been announced, O’Connor implies that it is the prosecution, with the help of the mainstream press, that has unfairly influenced the actual jury, made up of upper and middle-class men, and that now, with reports of the trial from the *Northern Star*’s own reporter, working-class men will have the opportunity to judge the trial for themselves. Here O’Connor combines criticism of the British legal system and the mainstream press with the subversive view that working men would be better jurors, imagining a time when the working classes have a voice in government, and encouraging readers to imagine this, as well.

Stating that “the press of England and Scotland had been busy poisoning the public mind against the Spinners” during the trial, O’Connor nonetheless asserts that *Northern Star* readers are above this coercion by spurring them to action, and a crucial aspect of this action requires expansion of the radical press and improved literacy. Stating that the government and the press “falsely imagined that the public mind would be *satisfied* with a sentence of transportation where *death* was expected,” O’Connor asserts, “I never entertained a notion of those brave fellows being guilty, even of one offense;

therefore *I am not satisfied*” (4). He then asks the rhetorical question, “At the moment when you are threatened with a still more coercive anti-labor code, can you, will you rest in peace, while vengeance is taken upon those who had the manliness to perform what you dared to suggest?” (4). Provoking readers by questioning their “manly” courage, O’Connor demands that they respond to the unjust guilty verdict by holding meetings across Britain and “paper[ing] the walls of every cottage with [their] demands,” employing the press as political warfare and highlighting the importance of widespread literacy to political activism (4). The image of print papering every cottage wall suggests that literate people live there—an important suggestion, given that the *Northern Star* printed O’Connor’s addresses to be read aloud to semi-literate and illiterate workers. This call to action is buttressed by more emotional appeals at the conclusion of the address that also implicate the importance of literacy. O’Connor argues that unions are “requisite and necessary” because of the flawed legal system: there are no laws to protect workers, as the spinners’ trial has illustrated. In O’Connor’s final lines, the middle-class government, which seeks to put down any attempt of workers to claim equal rights, is a “viper” that sends “rampant tyranny...stalking through the land,” and it is only by “united efforts”—including the prolific use of the press and the rise of literate workers—that this enemy will be slain.

In the address, O’Connor pairs thundering, over-the-top rhetoric with his very shrewd and intelligent illustration of how the spinners’ trial reveals the simultaneous need for Chartist organization and the expansion of radical print and working-class literacy. The exclusion from government of all working-class individuals, O’Connor suggests, results in an unjust legal system that punishes workers for their attempts at achieving

power through unions. Furthermore, this very system also attempts to alienate workers from each other, keeping them from coming to class consciousness and taking action toward righting these injustices. By addressing workers as a group and as “freemen,” O’Connor shows how workers of Great Britain have been inevitably connected by an oppressive government and exposes the mechanism by which that government attempts to divide them: the mainstream press. Making readers wise to this process of coercion, he further unites them by spurring them to act as alternative jurors, demanding justice where none has been found by holding meetings and engaging in radical print, which implicitly demands that they also improve their literacy. Working-class readers, then, are no longer villainous or ignorant, but instead intelligent, manly, worthy of higher social standing—and unified in this understanding of themselves *if* they do as he suggests. O’Connor’s address thus intervenes in a chaotic, divisive issue by promoting a unifying distrust of the government and its mouthpiece, the mainstream press, by counter-representing workers. Because of its unification of these issues, and because of his stress on the power of print, O’Connor’s address becomes the center around which the *Northern Star*’s counter-representation of the spinners is built.

On the page facing O’Connor’s address, an illustration of the five convicted spinners accompanies the serialization of the trial in the 27 January issue (figure 2.3). Showing the spinners in profile and dressed as gentlemen, with proper neck cloths and frock coats, the likeness is the first sizeable illustration to appear in the *Northern Star* since it began publication in November 1837. This is significant because even in the coming years illustrations were rare in the paper due to their extra cost and the technological difficulties of inserting steel plates and even the more popular and



Figure 2.3 Illustration of the Glasgow Spinners. *Northern Star*. 27 Jan. 1838. *Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition*. Web. 15 March 2013.

inexpensive woodcuts into the broadsheet format.⁶⁵ Yet the *Northern Star* did participate in the growing mass visual culture of the early Victorian era, as Malcolm Chase has shown, through their innovative portrait series circulated to subscribers separately from the paper (25).⁶⁶ These portraits depicting Chartist leaders and other working-class heroes were commissioned by the *Northern Star* were often painted by working-class artists, and were produced via the latest steel plate technology (33-4). The first in this series had already appeared: a notice in 16 December 1837 issue announces a “Splendid Portrait of Feargus O’Connor” that will be circulated to local subscribers as soon as possible. While more sophisticated than the woodcut of the spinners, the portraits are similar in that their portrayal of working-class leaders as gentlemen: leaders are well-dressed and painted against ornate and expensive-looking backdrops that often include books, paper, and pens. Seemingly “devoid of political imagery,” the portraits, like the illustration of the spinners, were nonetheless “profoundly political statements” that claimed a “high moral

⁶⁵ Steel engraving could not be included in letterpress at this time; even woodcuts were difficult for the *Northern Star* to include in the context of the paper because it was a broadsheet and not printed from a cylinder press (Chase 34).

⁶⁶ Other Chartist papers imitated the idea of a portrait series, but not to the same extent or quality (Chase 35).

ground for Chartism,” showing that the subject was a “man of intellect and business snatching a moment from more pressing affairs” (28-29). While the illustration of the spinners does not include many props—one of the spinners is wearing a scholarly-looking monocle—the message is the same as the portraits: these union leaders are not treacherous villains, conspiring against the crown, but instead upstanding citizens indistinguishable by appearance from enfranchised middle class businessmen.

This illustration intervenes not only in written portrayals of the spinners as sinister criminals against the crown, but also in the rapidly expanding pictorial press that portrayed the working classes as derelict, shabby, and imbecile drunks. These caricatures, often in the form of woodblock cartoons, appeared alongside written defamations of working-class character in mainstream newsprint, visually underscoring demeaning stereotypes. One of these images, collected by Dorothy Thompson, depicts a so-called “radical” as a poorly-dressed, unwashed, and uneducated derelict holding a bayonet who has clearly been brainwashed by Chartist leaders into a movement he does not fully understand.⁶⁷ The snippet of dialogue under the image, in which the figure speaks in a slurred, working-class accent, reveals that he “longs for a riverlution” so that he can see “all Lunnon in a blaze,” loot shops, hang the “rich kiddies” from lamp posts, and free prisoners. All of this violence he regards as a “lark,” not as a serious and humanitarian political movement. Instead of countering rampant caricaturing with similar cartoons that demonize the rich, the *Northern Star* instead focuses its engagement with visual culture upon counter-representing working-class leaders with dignity and intelligence. This “conspicuous” difference between the paper and the mainstream press, as well as other Chartist papers, also emphasizes the Chartist moral high ground, which in turn becomes

⁶⁷ This image is reprinted in Roberts and Thompson, *Images of Chartism*.

influential to readers, who used *Northern Star* portraits and illustrations to decorate their pubs, meeting halls, and homes (Anderson 183).

Is it problematic that the *Northern Star* chose to represent working-class leaders as gentlemen and not as common workers? Does this mean that the Chartist press was mimicking the social hierarchy of mainstream culture, therefore discounting the impact of their efforts to counter-represent the working classes? Chase argues that this is the case, that the portraits reveal that workers were “in thrall to the gentleman leader” and, furthermore, that the portraits falsely represent the “open-air” Chartist movement as having an “air of indoor respectability” (30, 45). In my view, this is an overly simplistic reading of the portraits that interestingly mirrors criticism of slave portraits and African American authors’ efforts to be respectable in the rhetorical posturing of slave narratives. As I stated earlier, the *Northern Star*’s claims about Chartist leaders’ gentlemanliness reflect one way in which the paper “consented” to mainstream cultural values: instead of questioning the ethos of gentlemanliness, they instead employed it to challenge ungentlemanly claims about the essential inferiority of the working classes. In doing this, the *Northern Star* co-opts the respectability of the middle and upper classes in order to erase essentialized difference: when wearing gentlemanly clothing, the spinners are indistinguishable from those who villanize them, providing a counterdiscourse to that of the biological inferiority of the working classes. Therefore, I read the gentlemanly pose of the portraits and the spinners woodcut as not only a disruption of the mainstream press’s inundation of the public with derelict and disreputable images of the working classes, but also a sophisticated challenge to the basis of these stereotypes that also advances the argument of working-class representation in government.

To further contest the conviction of the spinners and negative stereotyping in the mainstream press, the February 3 issue includes poetry written by workers that operates in two ways. First, it asserts that workers write poetry, confounding the stereotype that they were largely illiterate and uneducated. Second, the poems themselves are representations of workers *by* a worker, not a middle-class observer. On the page typically reserved for literary material, a poem entitled “Lines on the Conviction of the Glasgow Cotton Spinners” by T.B. Smith, written “for the *Northern Star*,” is immediately followed by a review of a collection of poems by Edward Allen, a Glasgow cotton spinner.⁶⁸ Smith’s poem, clearly written in the tradition of working-class ballads, bears striking resemblance to O’Connor’s address in its argument. Structured by a series of questions that become a series of instructions—“And is it so?,” “Must it be so?,” and and finally, “Go, Labour, go”—the poem reiterates O’Connor’s argument that the government is unjust and hypocritical and then challenges the reader to take action to change this. Evoking the supposed greatness of the British Empire at the beginning of the poem, calling Britain the “Empress of the Sea— / Whose proudest boast was once ‘My sons are free’,” the poet then casts doubt on this greatness by comparing this freedom to failing British navy: “Where now is freedom’s Ark? By tempests driven / on rocks, or blasted by the bolt of Heaven?” This loss of freedom, which the poet traces to Glasgow and the spinners’ trial, is meant to strike a foreboding note for the future of Britain’s international power, particularly when the poet pointedly asks, “Has liberty forsook her fav’rite land / T’erect her throne upon some foreign strand? / Or for her numerous crimes

⁶⁸ As I discuss in the first section of this chapter, the *Northern Star* encouraged readers to write their own responses to political events and to submit them for publication in the paper (Jones 6). In the January 6, 1838 issue, readers are encouraged to read and memorize these texts for recitation.

must Britain fall; / Hurl'd to destruction by the Lord of all?" The notion that God himself will punish Britain for its injustice to workers is followed by a series of exhortations for "brave, fearless working men" to stop "mourn[ing] and sigh[ing] in vain" and instead to "tell the tale" across the land:

Tell it, in [unreadable] groans—in children's cries,

Till the earth repeats it to the listening skies;

Tell it in deep-toned ocean's ceaseless roar,--

Tell it in thunder's voice from shore to shore;

After telling the tale of the spinners far and wide, readers are instructed to "Go...approach the regal throne," demanding justice from Queen Victoria on behalf of the spinners, and to continue speaking out on behalf of justice until "Labour's banished sons return again." The poem not only rehearses O'Connor's letter, but also depicts working men as speakers and writers who use their voices to act on behalf of the working classes. This emphasis on the power of defiant language in a poem by a working man reveals the dual focus I identified above: the literate worker counter-represents his class by writing powerful, intelligent workers into his poem. According to Martha Vicinus, this exemplifies the manner in which the Chartist press responded to negative representations of workers and the poor by calling for writers who "emphasized both the virtues of the working class and described the injustices of society that prevented the full development and recognition of the positive qualities of working people" (2). Here, the poet tells the tale of the spinners through poetry, an elevated genre widely considered beyond the limited capacity of working people, thus describing injustices and emphasizing virtues at the same time.

In addition to Smith's poem, the same issue of the paper also highlights these virtues and injustices overtly in a review of spinner Edward Allen's "little collection" of poems published by Manchester, Clark, & Co. Beginning with a description of the hardships of Allen's life "amid the din, and dust, and harrowment, and distraction of a cotton mill," the review asserts that "the fire of native genius respects no circumstances," meaning that Allen's innate poetic talent could not be quenched by the unfavorable conditions of the mill (7). As the review continues, the reviewer specifically poses the book as a challenge to "the lying villainy of those who prate about the ignorance of the working classes," arguing instead that the book contains "the real fire of Poetry and genuine merit," more than in "half the namby-pamby pieces of the high-bred lordlings who...say soft things, and string together...words without meaning" (7). Placing Allen's poems in contrast with those by upper-class poets, the reviewer suggests that while it is easy to be a poet when one is brought up in luxury, it is far more difficult when one must work in a cotton mill for a living. Allen's talent, the reader is meant to assume, is therefore more potent, more "genuine" than poetry by "high-bred lordlings" who need not overcome their circumstances in order to write and therefore are able to publish more easily. While the "manliness" that is celebrated in Smith's poem and O'Connor's address is not mentioned overtly here, it is alluded to, underscoring the same representation of working men as men unafraid to act in order to change their circumstances—and therefore worthy of equal social and political power. Reading and writing become manly acts, the *Northern Star* suggests, when accomplished despite adversity. Therefore, the review of Allen's poetry becomes a companion piece to Smith's poem, O'Connor's address, and the portrait of the spinners in counter-representing workers as literate

gentleman and in corroborating why readers should trust the *Northern Star* and not those papers that misrepresent Chartists, as the *Northern Star* simultaneously reveals through reprinting.

Reading January and February issues of the *Northern Star* back-to-back, as many working-class subscribers and regular readers would have done, the effort to counter-represent the spinners and the working classes as a whole overwhelms the pages, clearly establishing a working-class strategy of reading mainstream print and writing in response to it, building class consciousness and solidarity in response to a serious setback for the cause of Chartism while also making a case for the spread of radical print and underground literacy.

Frederick Douglass' Paper, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Ongoing Colonization Debate, March and April 1852

In the early 1850s, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* faced a setback for the abolitionist movement even more devastating in scope than the spinners' trial was for Chartism: the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Part of the Compromise of 1850, the Act more firmly entrenched slavery in American law by mandating the return of any slave who had escaped to the North. Law-enforcement officers were required to arrest anyone they suspected of being a runaway slave and return them to the claimant or face a fine of \$1,000. This meant, of course, that former slaves and free blacks alike were in danger, since false claims to ownership and kidnapping became common. Due to these dire circumstances, supporters of colonization renewed their efforts, much to Douglass's chagrin.⁶⁹ Just as the spinners' trial became a decisive issue for the Chartist movement,

⁶⁹ McHenry states that "whites' resentment of free blacks intensified throughout the antebellum period, paralleling the rising visibility of African Americans in urban spaces," leading to an increase in caricatures appearing in the mainstream press (89). The northern urban centers of New York, Philadelphia, and

the Fugitive Slave Act became a life-or-death issue for the anti-colonization abolitionist movement, many of whose black leaders were runaway slaves, and whose rhetoric depended upon basic tenets of democracy in the Declaration of Independence that were now being even more flagrantly denied. The Act, which, as I mentioned earlier, radicalized Douglass and prompted him to change the name and focus of his paper, continued to haunt him and his paper in 1852 when another controversial development took place: the publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As Levine has shown, debate over the representation of blacks by a white author and the issue of colonization, which the novel seemed to advocate, took place within the pages of the paper, beginning in 1852 and continuing throughout 1853, and threatened to divide the black community politically into pro- and anti-colonization camps. Early in 1852, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* intervened in the mainstream press's negative representations of slaves and northern blacks, particularly those meant to defend the institution of slavery in general and the Fugitive Slave Act in particular, in order to support the notion that African Americans should continue to agitate for equal rights in America. Like the *Northern Star*, the paper took a multi-faceted approach involving reprinting, original journalism, and literary contributions that responded to the complex ideological connections between the issues of colonization, the Act, and negative representations of blacks in the mainstream press. This approach becomes particularly evident in March and April issues of 1852.

Boston—also the centers of the growing publishing industry and the black press in the 1830s—were areas of increased discrimination for blacks, particularly in the context of economic downturns that led to competition for jobs and housing (89). “Changing theories about race and racial difference, and a proliferation of arguments refuting the idea of human equality” became part of a public rhetoric that led to “deteriorating race relations” (89). This made whites more willing to accept the plan of colonization advanced by the American Colonization Society (90).

Throughout the month of March, the paper reprinted several articles from mainstream papers that represent African Americans as inferior to whites. While the *Northern Star* had straightforwardly reprinted negative excerpts from the mainstream press and then refuted them, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* engaged in a more complex discernment process of mainstream papers. Some of the reprinted articles are chosen because they already refute negative representations appearing in other papers; other articles are chosen because they include negative representations that have yet to be challenged. This more varied approach to selecting articles from mainstream papers can be attributed to a more complex newsprint culture in antebellum America than in early Victorian Britain.⁷⁰ Douglass, in reprinting affirming and hostile articles from mainstream papers, guides black readers through a potentially hazardous newsprint culture.

On the front page of the March 4 issue, the column ironically titled “Pleasant Reading for Free People,” reprinted from the *Albany Journal*, responds to articles from the *Lynchburg Virginian* and the *Frederick News* that contradict each other about whether slave prices have risen or fallen after the Compromise. The price of slaves was seen as a political thermometer of sorts in the South, and the effect of the Compromise on slave prices indicated the success or failure of that legislation for southern slave owners. For the black readers of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, on the other hand, whether the prices had risen or fallen was a moot point; the more significant issue was that black individuals were still being viewed as commodities and not as humans, and therefore were being depicted in this discussion as chattel, not as people. Both excerpts from the southern

⁷⁰ As I discussed earlier in the chapter, papers of varied political affiliation appeared throughout the nation, while in Britain, papers' political affiliations were more deeply entrenched

articles are demeaningly descriptive of slave bodies, but the *News*, which argued that slave prices had fallen, is more so, stating, “We saw a Negro man, represented to be thirty years of age (though looking old) perfectly sound, and of good form and stature, knocked off at \$510. A girl of seventeen, tall, genteel and likely, sold for \$600” (1). This representation of black individuals as chattel, as laboring bodies instead of human beings, joins the demeaning genre of the runaway slave advertisement, which, as Marcus Wood has pointed out, employed negative language and at times images to circulate racism among whites and fear among blacks.⁷¹ An advertisement from a North Carolina paper exemplifies this by emphasizing an aging slave’s status as a commodity:

RANAWAY from the Subscriber...his negro man Charles. He is about 57 years of age; about 5 feet 6 inches high; raw boned, and very stockily built; yellow complected; his hair is very straight, and turning grey; has but few fore teeth; his right hand and two or three of his fingers are so badly cut that he can’t use them; back badly scarred; ...lean faced; lock bowlegged; his humps open, and has very broad flat foot...Reward of \$25. (rpt. in Parker)⁷²

Representations like this one, now appearing with regularity in the North as well as the South, contributed to a print and visual culture of “colossal vulgarity” that compounded the overall degradation of African Americans and the reinforcement of their inferiority (Wood 143). Douglass’s reprinting of the *Albany Journal*’s defamation of the Southern mainstream press’s mimicking of these ads serves the purpose of raising awareness

⁷¹ See Wood’s *Blind Memory*, chapter 2.

⁷² This ad appeared in the *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Weekly Advertiser* on October 9, 1840. It is reprinted in Parker, *Stealing a Little Freedom: Advertisements for Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1791-1840* (1994).

among black readers about the implications of the Fugitive Slave Act, but also encourages readers not to accept these representations as universal.

Lest readers think that only the southern press was guilty of misleading representation, the next column, entitled “The Pro-Slavery Press,” calls the reporting of the northern mainstream press morally corrupt, using as an example the *Boston Courier* calling blacks “ignorant and deluded agents” of murder (1). Directly attacking this rhetoric, Douglass responds by asserting that this sort of misrepresentation only reveals the “moral corruption” of slavery’s supporters, which is particularly evident in “the recent false and murderous demonstrations of the Whig and Democratic press” (1). Similarly, in the following issue, a column entitled “Argus Democracy” reprints a defamation of northern blacks originally printed in southern papers stating that they “spend their days in idleness and their nights in vice, depending upon charity or theft for the necessities of life” (March 11, 1852, 3). Representing blacks as incapable of social improvement, the article goes on to assert that they “will always be found doing the lowest drudgery,” remaining “half-fed, half-clothed, and uneducated” and therefore better off enslaved (3). The same article defames abolitionists as well, calling them a “treacherous, hypocritical, ungenerous, and uncharitable set of fanatics” and claiming, “We do not in the least misrepresent their character” (3). This article, while southern in origin, is reprinted in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* from the *Portland (Maine) Inquirer*, revealing that these essentialist notions of black inequality also circulate in the North. Again intervening in the misleading northern print landscape, Douglass’s editorial framing of this article exposes the *Inquirer* as a pro-slavery paper. At the beginning of the article, he states, “The following article, taken with credit from one of our exchanges, is a

fair specimen of that paper and its ‘democracy,’ with which, we regret to say, honorable and even Christian men consent to hold a relation” (3). Instead of appearing credible, then, the article appears in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* as yet another example of the “false and murderous demonstrations” of the mainstream press and another reason why readers should not trust its representations of African Americans.

While Douglass does briefly respond to these reprinted articles in the same issue, a more direct reply by James McCune Smith—under the pen name “Communipaw”—appears in the following issue: “The Black News-Vendor,” the first in a series called “The Heads of the Colored People,” which Maurice S. Lee describes as “a series of sketches [that are] partly a satire on racial sciences such as phrenology, partly an exercise in sociological types, and partly a literary work in the tradition of Dickens” (116).⁷³ The title directly references racist phrenological pseudo-science that had become immensely popular by the 1850s, particularly in mainstream print culture, and was used by pro-slavery activists to support black inferiority. For example, illustrations of black profiles and their similarity to monkeys appeared in mainstream magazines like *Harper’s* in the 1850s.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the *American Phrenological Journal* published analyses of the profiles of great American men, accompanied by articles analyzing how their features indicated their superior characters.⁷⁵ Titling his column “The Heads of the Colored

⁷³ Smith, as writer for the *Colored American*, had written “profiles of important figures,” such as Henry Boyd, who had risen from slavery to become “Cincinnati’s premier craftsman” despite rampant racism (Vogel 45). These profiles, reprinted in other black papers, were meant to “create a change in their readers’ thinking on the subjects of black virtue, labor, and race” (45).

⁷⁴ Michael D. Harris includes a detailed discussion of this in *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (2003). See chapter 1.

⁷⁵ In 1850-51, the *Journal* published a series of profiles entitled “Portraits of the Presidents” that included illustrations and an analysis of virtues that could be detected from the presidents’ heads; see for example “The Character of Thomas Jefferson” in the March 1850 issue.

People, Done with a Whitewash Brush,” Smith ironically references these profiles and their racist assumptions, an irony that the column’s epigraph highlights:

Age zographon artiste,
Graphe zographon artiste,
Best of painters, come away,
Paint me with the *whitewash brush*, I pray. (2)

Here Smith boldly addresses the notion (assumed by whites and some blacks) that in order for portraits of blacks to be favorable, they must be “whitewashed,” or made to appear more like whites. Smith’s six “word portraits” of working-class and professional blacks in New York City that appear in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in 1852 and ’53 are an attempt to invalidate this notion, as well as negative stereotypes about northern blacks like those discussed above. They also, in their detailed descriptions of black physical attributes, undercut runaway slave advertisements appearing regularly in the North and South. Complicating assumed distinctions between the races, Smith combines irony and earnestness to depict average blacks as they are, not as they should be—depictions that necessarily involve engaging with ideas of literacy, citizenship, and American identity. Showcasing the dignity of free black workers in “The Heads of the Colored People,” Smith also provides positive models for readers, showing that, despite the claims of pro-slavery apologists, blacks are able to advance from slavery even in the face of adversity.

“The Black News-Vendor” portrays a dignified, hard-working man who has lost his legs in his escape from slavery, but who supports himself and his family despite this limitation. Smith describes his physical features in a manner that deliberately references and undercuts negative descriptions of black bodies in the mainstream press:

Our colored news vendor kneels about four foot ten; [has] black transparent skin, a broad and swelling chest, whose symmetry proclaims Virginia birth, a fine long hooked nose, evidently from the first families, wide, loose mouth, sharpish face, clean-cut hazel eyes, buried beneath luxuriantly folded lids, and prominent perceptive faculties. (2)

Like the North Carolina slave advertisement, which included a description of the subject's straight hair and "yellow" complexion, Smith's description references the news vendor's mixed blood, hinting at the impossibility of racial essentialism. Becoming increasingly ironic, Smith continues, "I did not ask him to pull off his cloth cap...lest his brow should prove him the incontestable descendant of Thomas Jefferson and Black Sal" (2). Slyly pointing out how the institution of slavery, with its sanctioning of rape, means that many blacks are the direct descendants of America's great founding fathers, Smith takes his critique a step further by mentioning that despite the "respectable and pious" *New York Tribune's* recent reprinting of "all the stale anti-negroisms of Jefferson's notes" at the request of a southern planter, Jefferson's black children are "as widely scattered as his own writings throughout the world" (2). In personifying the news-vendor nobly, and thus contradicting the reprinted articles in the previous issue, Smith lampoons phrenology, revealing one of its fatal flaws: slaves often have the same blood as their supposedly superior masters. The black news-vendor's features are striking like those of Jefferson's, which at first appears problematic—is Smith actually painting the vendor with a whitewash brush? Is he assenting to racist phrenology and its racial hierarchy? Yet Smith, in his critique of Jefferson, reveals that Jefferson's features do not equal moral and intellectual superiority, as his hypocritical relationship with "Black Sal" illustrates. This

hypocrisy, found in Jefferson's contradictory writings about democracy and race, is still a threat: Jefferson's writings are still being "widely scattered" in support of slavery, as the reprinting of his *Notes* in the *New York Tribune* the previous week reveals. Smith's sophisticated parallel between Jefferson's texts and his children, however, intervenes in this spread of hypocritical print. Just as *Notes* appears in the *Tribune*, "Heads" appears in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and circulates proof that Jefferson's racist claims are invalid. The "head" of the news-vendor, instead of replicating Jefferson's greatness, reveals that Jefferson's textual assertion of black inferiority, which had found a legacy in pro-slavery rhetoric of the 1850s, is fatally flawed, as the noble character of his "son" attests.

Smith dedicates the rest of the column to a brief biography of the news vendor based upon Smith's interview of the man about his escape from slavery, his successful business, and his hopes for his children. Portraying the news vendor with an even hand, Smith announces his successes (he is a top-selling vendor) and his shortcomings (he cannot afford a shop of his own), revealing that he has not, in fact, painted the man with a white-wash brush. Smith ends the column by announcing his future hopes for the news vendor as well as for others in his position: "News Vendor! You must have a shop. Your story must be printed and sold" (2). Here Smith again emphasizes how the news vendor's story, once in print, can circulate counter to Jefferson's texts, engaging in print combat particularly for black readers, whom Smith emphasizes at the column's conclusion:

"There is hope for all who, like him, are battling against slavery and caste" (2).⁷⁶ Smith's

⁷⁶ In his other writings, Smith had linked classism against blacks to British aristocratic tyranny, particularly concerning colonization. This combined classicism and racism kept free blacks from upward mobility and thus from voting—states made property requirements similar to the British system (Vogel 42). In the 1850s, 87 percent of blacks in New York still worked "menial or unskilled jobs, the lowest rung on the ladder in the antebellum North" (Vogel 43).

insistence that blacks could elevate themselves attempted, according to Todd Vogel, to “refut[e] any public perception that blacks were a passive people suited only to serve, established that their minds proved an effective a tool as their muscles, and...that...they could participate in a republican government as full citizens,” thus “articulate[ing] an alternative vision for race, labor, and political participation” (38). Smith seizes the opportunity to not only criticize phrenology, Jefferson, and the mainstream press, but also employs counter-representation to express the paper’s anti-colonization stance.

Portraying the news vendor as the suspected son of the author of the Declaration of Independence, Smith links the vendor irrevocably, in body and in rhetoric, to the United States. As a word-portrait, “The Heads of the Colored People” rewrites the demeaning physical descriptions of slaves and the defamations of character that are reprinted in previous issues, emphasizing the dignity of African American readers and imbuing them with a renewed sense of their right to freedom in America, which necessarily involves the power of print, as the news vendor and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* suggest.

Not willing to leave readers in any doubt about the paper’s position on Jefferson’s *Notes*, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* reprints the letter from the slaveholder lauding Jefferson’s *Notes* to the *Tribune* along with excerpts from *Notes* itself in the 1 April issue. Under the title “Jefferson and Slavery,” the slaveholder’s comments and the *Tribune*’s acquiescence to his request for the reprint are showcased on the front page of the issue. Douglass responds in an editorial that straightforwardly outlines the hypocrisy that Smith ironically characterized in the previous issue. “As to the speculations of Mr. Jefferson, in respect to the character of the Negro race,” Douglass writes, “it is enough to answer, that it is a well-known fact that Jefferson attached so little importance to these speculations

himself, as to have entirely disregarded them in his practice” (3). After discrediting Jefferson’s statements about race, Douglass then instructs black readers how to respond, calling them to action: “Every attack, of this sort, upon the colored people, should only lead them to strive more zealously and vigorously for the attainment of a character, invulnerable to the darts of malice and pride” (3). In calling for readers to defiantly strengthen their characters in response to racist Jeffersonian rhetoric, Douglass refers readers back to the news vendor, who exemplifies this defiance by selling print. Interestingly, Douglass also asks that “white fellow-citizens” only need to “do us justice, and thereby, to give us the incentives afforded to others” (3). In doing so, Douglass reveals that he has not completely dismissed Jefferson’s writings, but instead seeks to perfect them: the Declaration of Independence, Douglass implies, should extend to blacks as well as whites, particularly since, as the news vendor and Douglass himself, the son of a white man, prove, the races cannot truly be essentialized.⁷⁷ This carefully bolsters his anti-colonizationist agenda and renews a call for readers to work toward equality in America, where a democratic framework existed, even if flawed.

Douglass’s stance on colonization and his constant battle to counter-represent African Americans would be challenged as 1852 progressed by the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The novel, written by a white abolitionist and celebrated by abolitionists in America and Britain, became difficult for Douglass to fit into the context of his ideology because it portrayed blacks as subservient and appeared to advocate colonization. Yet Douglass, as a prominent abolitionist and correspondent of Stowe’s, could hardly

⁷⁷ Douglass had been fixated on the Declaration since he began publishing the *North Star* (Fishkin and Peterson 78-79).

denounce the novel overtly within *Frederick Douglass' Paper*.⁷⁸ In the 8 April issue, a glowing review of the novel appeared that praised Stowe's representation of blacks and encouraged readers to read the novel. In the next issue, however, the second installment of "The Heads of the Colored People" appeared, telling the life story of a boot-black who, like the news vendor, makes an honest living for himself and his family in New York. Independent instead of subservient, the boot-black—like Washington, the main character of Douglass's short story "The Heroic Slave" which would be serialized in the paper a year later—contrasts directly with Uncle Tom, Eliza, and George. "The Heads of the Colored People," which would continue to appear during the debate over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, representation, and colonization in the paper later in 1852 and into 1853, becomes a means through which Douglass is able to resist problematic aspects of the novel without directly rejecting it and therefore endangering his abolitionist reputation and his paper.⁷⁹

In these issues of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, Douglass negotiates a barrage of mainstream print that threatens to undermine his paper's—and therefore, his readers' and his own—claims to equality within the system of American democracy. Demonstrating his sophisticated reading of these texts, Douglass constructs a counter-narrative to mainstream narratives of racial inferiority that instructs readers how to maintain faith in the ideals of America while critiquing its realities. This scene of reading includes reprinted texts, commentary on those texts, and original reporting by a well-read African

⁷⁸ Levine raises the possibility that Douglass wanted to remain on good terms with Stowe because she had promised money from the sale of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for a black free school. She reportedly never followed through.

⁷⁹ Levine considers "The Heroic Slave" to be Douglass's indirect response to the novel's representation of blacks as subservient: Washington, the main character, is powerful, militant, literate, and friends with a white man (84). Similarly, McHenry asserts, "The Heroic Slave pointedly counters or revises some of the images put forth by Stowe's novel" (127). Strangely, neither mentions "Heads" at all.

American writer that slyly undercuts white supremacist ideology while supporting democratic ideals. Therefore, Douglass is able to illustrate the importance of improving and spreading black literacy, even during politically oppressive times. During these months, his paper, like the *Northern Star* in early 1838, connects the achievement of equality with the power of the press, advocating the pursuit of underground literacy by employing the mainstream press to undercut mainstream hierarchies.

Emerging from similarly oppressive cultural contexts, and shaped by the working-class and Black presses of the 1820s and '30s, the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers circulated the notion that political liberation was best achieved through print, and that literacy was a marker of social and racial equality. Despite being rooted in different radical movements and separated by the Atlantic, the papers faced similar challenges for establishing successful distribution and addressed them in parallel ways, embodying the strategies of underground literacy. Employing agents as contributors, distributors, and political activists, both papers avoided the untrustworthy national mail systems while also managing to reach disparate working-class and black communities across their respective nations. O'Connor and Douglass constructed the content of their papers to address communal modes of reading that were common practice among the British working classes and African Americans, providing columns for readers at multiple stages of literacy. Confronting a mainstream press that gave voice to the elite while spreading racist and classist stereotypes, the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers employed reprinting paired with commentary and self-representation to wage discursive battle. In doing so, the papers created scenes of reading that both represented how many working-

class and black radicals read critically and modeled how others should read. Within these scenes of reading, mainstream and radical texts existed side-by-side, meaning that working-class and black readers of these papers participated centrally in transatlantic antebellum literary culture, reading the same texts as middle-class and elite audiences, but assimilating them into subversive political frameworks. In chapter 3, this foundational strategy of underground reading remains, but the scene of reading changes dramatically as I explore the possibilities for slaves practicing underground literacy among reprinted texts in plantation libraries.

Chapter 3
Haunting the Master's Library: *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Underground Slave
Literacy, and Transatlantic Fiction in Southern Libraries

“[The act of reading] is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products...[but instead] through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.” –Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

“Reading, by definition, is rebellious and vagabond, ...[and readers] use infinite numbers of subterfuges to procure prohibited books, to read between the lines, and to subvert the lessons imposed on them.” –Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books*

“[In the library at night,] the atmosphere changes...Time seems closer to that moment halfway between wakefulness and sleep in which the world can be comfortably reimagined. My movements feel unwittingly furtive, my activity secret. I turn into something of a ghost...Free from quotidian constraints, unobserved in the late hours, my eyes and hands roam recklessly across the tidy rows, restoring chaos. One book calls to another unexpectedly, creating alliances across different cultures and centuries...If the library in the morning suggests an echo of the severe and reasonably wishful order of the world, the library at night seems to rejoice in the world's essential, joyful muddle.” –Alberto Minguel, *The Library at Night*

When describing how the act of reading is bound to the materiality of everyday life, theorists, ironically, often use the language of haunting to describe a process that appears immaterial, ahistorical, and fleeting. Michel de Certeau, the foremost of these theorists, calls readers “travelers” who “move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write” (174). As a result, he speaks of the act of reading as spectral, ubiquitous but elusive, “insinuat[ing] itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly,” a process “playful, protesting, fugitive” (174-75). Likewise, Roger Chartier argues that “reading, by its very definition, is rebellious and vagabond,” always a counterpoint to the “order” that book publishing seeks to assert (viii). Alberto Minguel, albeit ruminatively, reveals the influence of de Certeau and Chartier when he describes the feeling of reading in his library at night. Despite the fact

that Minguel occupies his own library, there is something about the act of reading at night that becomes subversive: his “movements feel unwittingly furtive,” his “activity secret,” and he “turn[s] into something of a ghost” that is “free” to defy the library’s attempts at order (14).

De Certeau, Chartier, and Minguel’s language of haunting communicates a basic problem in constructing histories of reading: texts remain, but readers do not. Texts that have survived the centuries tell us part of their histories—the author, the publisher, the text’s owner, perhaps—but not all of them. Hovering at the margins of these old texts are hints of unknown readers and their unpredictable acts of reading, ghosts that beckon to us to look beneath the seeming orderliness of print culture to the “vagabonds” who, through transgressive acts of reading, disrupt our orderly view of past reading audiences. These acts that seem so spectral, so fugitive, and thus, so difficult to discover, were embedded in the daily life of readers, particularly those for whom material circumstances clearly defined and constrained their access to literacy and print. De Certeau asserts that everyday actions can “bring to light” how seemingly powerless groups transgressed dominant social structures, and that the position of the body itself can tell us about the act of reading (xv; 175). Similarly, for Chartier, acts of reading are not determined by the message of the text alone, but instead are mediated by everyday life and the role of materiality—of books and readers—in the act of reading (8, 10).

De Certeau and Chartier’s theorization of reading as spectral yet embedded in everyday life provides a basis for investigating the reading practices of American chattel slaves in the antebellum period. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, problematic assumptions have caused many scholars to dismiss the possibility of widespread slave

literacy. Because the practice of teaching literacy to slaves was outlawed in five southern states in the 1830s and widely discouraged in others, because it was often difficult for slaves to meaningfully encounter print, and because the everyday life of a slave was governed by labor, scholars have assumed that only a small number of slaves were literate, and that slave communities did not take part in antebellum print culture.¹ In response to these assumptions, I argue that these very circumstances—which were defined by white surveillance and the material proximity of white culture—instead of effectively banishing slave reading, provided slaves with opportunities to read the same texts as their masters, and thus to participate in antebellum print culture through underground reading. Slaves’ relationship with print, because of the limitations posed by the dominant culture, was “highly contextual” and relied upon serendipitous contact with texts owned by whites, according to Grey Gundaker (484, 490). This serendipity, to a lesser degree, also characterized the book ownership of southern aristocrats, who, because of the lack of publishing in the South, procured their print from the North and sometimes Britain through the unreliable mail, traveling agents, and their own travel. Once deposited in private southern libraries, this print was frequently left under the supervision of slaves, who would have furtive, irregular, and “highly contextual” access to texts. Viewed through the lenses of de Certeau and Chartier, the task of identifying and exploring the serendipitous contexts in which slaves encountered print materializes acts of reading that were, by necessity, ghostly and fleeting. Taking on one aspect of this admittedly daunting task, this chapter establishes the private southern “master’s” library as a possible context, or scene, of slave literacy, one that has proven difficult to

¹ See chapter 1 for my discussion of slave literacy statistics; I discuss anti-literacy laws further in the second part of this chapter.

historicize because of its necessarily transgressive, furtive, and unrecorded nature. To do so, the chapter addresses how and what books came to be housed in southern libraries, how slaves had access to these books, and how slaves interpreted what they read, assimilating the messages of mainstream print into subversive forms of self-representation.²

The starting point for my connection between slaves and their masters' libraries is, in itself, spectral and elusive: *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, a handwritten, hand-bound manuscript potentially written by a female slave under the pseudonym Hannah Crafts. Since Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discovered the manuscript in 2002, scholars have been fixated on identifying with certainty the author's identity and the authenticity of the narrative, yet the text's author has remained ghostly.³ The woman behind the pseudonym has vanished from the historical record, leaving behind only a text that, placed in conversation with other texts illustrating the potential literacy of slaves, shows that slaves working in close proximity to their masters' libraries *read*. There is little doubt, despite controversy over Crafts's identity, that the author of the text was an avid reader of transatlantic fiction, and this certainty, paired with the likely possibility of her identity as a former slave, demands scholarly attention.⁴ Appearing to be a fictionalized

² In undertaking this task, I have been inspired by Chartier's challenge to write a "history of reading" instead of a "history of what is read" (5). One way he suggests going about this is "focusing attention on the publishing formulas that offer old texts to new readers of a humbler sort and in greater number," taking texts out of the sociological class they initially corresponded to and finding out what happened when "readers of more humble social condition were put in possession of books that were not specifically designed for them" (8).

³ Speculations that the author was a free-born black woman, a white woman, or even a white man have been articulated by respected scholars, as I will discuss in the second part of the chapter, but none of these has produced more persuasive evidence than that presented by Gates that the narrative was, indeed, written by an enslaved or formerly enslaved woman.

⁴ Rebecca Soares suggests that the "most productive way" to read Crafts is as a reader, not as an author, yet in doing so, Soares maintains that her "racial identity becomes less important" than her "position in the print culture matrix" (2). Given my focus on slave literacy, I disagree with Soares: Crafts's racial identity is central to her role as a reader, particularly as most slaves were assumed to be illiterate.

autobiography, the narrative assimilates popular transatlantic novels listed in the 1850 library catalog of the man believed to be Crafts's master, John Hill Wheeler, and thus builds upon evidence from published slave narratives that many slaves could not only read, but had access to the same texts as their owners—and other Americans who were part of an increasingly homogenous literary culture. The possible materialization, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, of a ghostly reader in her master's library suggests that when examined through the context of private southern libraries, ghostly readers can gain some clarity and shape. As Alan Rice has stated, "black presences shadow Anglo-American culture" (155). Private libraries, which have been much more reliably documented than slave reading by wealthy and powerful white men, become an alternate means of encountering slave literacy. Wheeler's library catalog, then, becomes a means of exploring the possibility that a slave would be capable of writing a text with as many direct literary allusions as *The Bondwoman's Narrative*.

Building from this possibility of a slave's presence in her master's library and connecting it to epistolary, testimonial, and printed evidence of slave literacy, I assert that because of their close physical proximity to their masters and the domestic nature of their labor, house slaves had access to their masters' libraries—sometimes with permission from their masters, sometimes surreptitious. Furthermore, the content of these libraries, despite assumptions about the lack of *belles lettres* in the antebellum South, closely matched the holdings of libraries in the North, connecting slave readers to a national literary culture that, as I illustrate in chapter 1, was defined by the practice of reprinting. To establish the context of the master's library as a scene of slave reading, I compare the catalog of Wheeler's North Carolina library circa 1850—Crafts's scene of reading—with

catalogs from two other private North Carolina libraries, all of which contained a large number of transatlantic reprints and, to differing degrees, reveal how reprinted texts arrived in the South. The most significant of these libraries belonged to James Johnston of Hayes Plantation who saved book receipts as well as letters written by his slaves, one of which specifically mentions reading in Johnston's library. These archived items, placed in conversation with Wheeler's catalog and the *Bondwoman's Narrative*, establish a connection between the transatlantic reprint industry and slave readership.

By examining private library catalogs alongside texts and testimonies by slaves, this chapter traces the movement of reprinted texts from Britain to America, from North to South, and from master to slave—a journey that began with the mainstream reprint industry described in chapter 1 and then progressed underground. Like the underground literacy encouraged and enacted by the *Northern Star* and Douglass's papers, discussed in chapter 2, slaves reading texts owned by their masters depended upon the apparatus of mainstream print and practices of reprinting to procure texts. But in the master's library, the dominant culture's ownership of reprinted texts, as well as the danger of "poaching" them, was material and quantifiable as well as ideological: just as white masters owned slaves, they also owned texts, and when slaves read their masters' texts, they transgressed the notion of books and their own bodies as their master's property. As a direct result of these boundaries and the surveillance that policed them, evidence of slaves' underground literacy becomes less clear, more ghostly, since writing, and especially non-pseudonymous publication, provided evidence of transgression and therefore more potential for punishment.⁵ While this can be seen as a scholarly problem—published texts

⁵ Trish Loughran argues that black writers of the 1850s valued pseudonyms and fictionalized autobiography in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act in order to hide their identities. Telling the truth in

provide more stable, widely accepted evidence—it can also be seen as a scholarly imperative, particularly regarding African American literary history. Building from Toni Morrison’s claim that “invisible things are not necessarily ‘not there’,” Rice states, “The task of the critic is to find the specters, to allow forgotten and troubling voices speaking room, and to make their histories as central to the academy as those to whom they shadow” (11; 166). In order to accomplish this, we must give “speaking room” to unpublished manuscripts, many of uncertain origin and authorship, such as *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*; we must also investigate archives named for white men in order to find texts, like Johnston’s slave letters, hiding in the shadows; and overall, we must accept that these texts present possibilities—not certainties—even as we maintain our scholarly discomfort with uncertainty. For these reasons, I will continue to use the words “possible” and “possibility” in this chapter as I employ manuscripts to connect underground slave literacy to mainstream transatlantic reprinting.

In order to trace the connection between transatlantic texts, northern reprinting, southern libraries, and slave readers, the first section of this chapter establishes the pervasive presence of reprinted texts in plantation libraries, specifically reprinted British fiction, held in all three libraries. My examination of the content of these libraries establishes a point of contact between slaves and the transatlantic reprint industry, which might otherwise prove far more difficult for slaves to access. The chapter’s second section surveys the boundaries that attempted to contain slave literacy and statements from published narratives and testimonials that suggest how slaves circumvented these boundaries in order to practice underground literacy, often within their master’s home.

print could, she argues, “reenslave rather than ensure passage into freedom” (413). Douglass was an example of this in the 1840s: entering into print and naming his master meant that he had to flee to England in 1846 to avoid reenslavement

Given this context, I then look specifically at how *The Bondwoman's Narrative's* assimilation of British fiction illustrates ways in which the circulation and ownership of transatlantic books and reprints among the southern aristocracy made these texts accessible to at least some slaves, enabling them to impact a national antebellum black community. Crafts assimilates sentimental and sensational transatlantic fiction—prevalent in private southern libraries, including Wheeler's—to represent the experience of a house slave learning to read surreptitiously. Switching from a direct representation of reading at the narrative's beginning to a more nuanced appropriation of allusions from British fiction as the text continues, Crafts provides a blueprint of how slaves' underground reading could have operated on an antebellum plantation, as well as how that reading could lead to the transgression of physical and ideological boundaries. Significantly, however, Crafts' use of the very British titles and editions reprinted by publishers in New York and Philadelphia illuminates the networks of print that connected London to not only New York and Philadelphia, but also plantations of the coastal South; networks that, as a result, influenced not only white aristocratic and middle-class readers, but slaves as well. Thus, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, in concert with plantation library catalogs, archived correspondence, and other slave testimonials, not only revises our notions of what and how slaves read, but also how slaves participated in the world of antebellum print—as ghostly yet wholly material readers.

I. British Fiction in Private Southern Libraries: The Transatlantic Book Trade and Three Library Catalogs

The journey of reprinted British texts from northeastern publishers to slave readers was a complicated one, and therefore, these routes are difficult to recreate. As I discussed in chapter one, the practice of reprinting was nearly impossible to control:

northeastern publishers who initially reprinted and distributed British texts in book and periodical formats could not fully control their circulation, while the further reprinting of these texts by local printers and newspapers extended beyond northeastern publishers' control altogether. Problems of circulation were particularly acute in the South, since print had to travel further and pass through more hands to reach its destination. That destination was, most often, wealthy southern men, many of whom cultivated sizable private libraries in their homes to serve as a mark of economic and cultural distinction. At this point, the journey from publisher to slave becomes even more obscure, traceable only through the scanty evidence left by enslaved readers. While the underground portion of this journey is the ultimate focus of this chapter, it is first necessary to establish how the mainstream reprint industry circulated texts in the South and what texts in particular were being purchased by slave owners. These mainstream routes of circulation, and the traditional roles of producer and consumer enacted by northeastern publishers and wealthy southerners, become the apparatus through which slaves had access to print.

Therefore, before turning to slave literacy in the second part of this chapter, I investigate privileged southern print culture as it appears through the lens of three private libraries in eastern North Carolina. The first, belonging to John Hill Wheeler—slave owner, pro-slavery politician, and owner of land in North Carolina and Virginia—is my primary impetus for choosing eastern North Carolina as the main area of investigation for this project.⁶ Gates and other scholars of *The Bondswoman's Narrative* believe Wheeler to

⁶ While I chose the region of eastern North Carolina because of the possible connection between Wheeler and Crafts, there are other reasons why the region is significant for a study of slave literacy. David Walker, agent for *Freedom's Journal* and author of the *Appeal*, was born in Wilmington, NC and likely learned to read there (Wilentz viii). Walker's connections in and around Wilmington—including a slave named Jacob Cowan, who ran a tavern—allowed him to distribute the *Appeal* throughout North Carolina in 1830 (Hinks 137). Furthermore, Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative also reveals the extensive influence of popular fiction, was from Edenton, NC, where Hayes Plantation, location of Johnston's library, was located (Loughran

have been Hannah Crafts's owner, making his library holdings particularly important for establishing possible connections between private libraries and slave readership. Wheeler personally catalogued his library in 1850, and this surviving catalog, of 1,200 titles, featuring a notably rich collection of British fiction, reveals the broad scope of the library's holdings, which can be considered medium-sized in comparison to other private southern libraries with extant catalogs.⁷ The question remained, however, as to how Wheeler's library compared to other private libraries in terms of British fiction holdings: were Wheeler's slaves the only ones who could have had a wide selection of British novels to choose from? To provide some context for Wheeler's library, and to extend the possibility of slaves reading British fiction in their master's libraries beyond one specific scenario, I also investigate two other private libraries from eastern North Carolina. The first of these comparative libraries was considered the most prominent in the region—James Johnston's library at Hayes Plantation in Edenton (figure 3.1). Johnston's library, cataloged twice before the Civil War, also contains a wide variety of genres, including a large selection of reprinted British fiction.⁸ These catalogs are more consistently detailed than Wheeler's, providing dates of publication and volume numbers, and Johnston also saved receipts from and correspondence with booksellers, making the journey of print to his library traceable. Even more significantly, Johnston's library, like Wheeler's, is linked to slave readership: Johnston preserved letters from his slaves along with his

380). Given these two examples alone, it is clear that slaves in the area were able to learn to read and to access print, despite North Carolina's law against teaching slaves to read and providing books for them, adopted in 1830 (Cornelius 33).

⁷ According to Michael O'Brien, private southern libraries "varied greatly in size and quality"; the "greatest" known collection belonged to Charles Smith in Charleston, who had 20,000 volumes, but on average, many private libraries held between 1,500 and 5,000 volumes (488). Wheeler's library catalog can be found in the John Hill Wheeler Papers, 1830-1882 at Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸ The first catalog, dated 1830, lists over 1500 titles (Spearman 10).

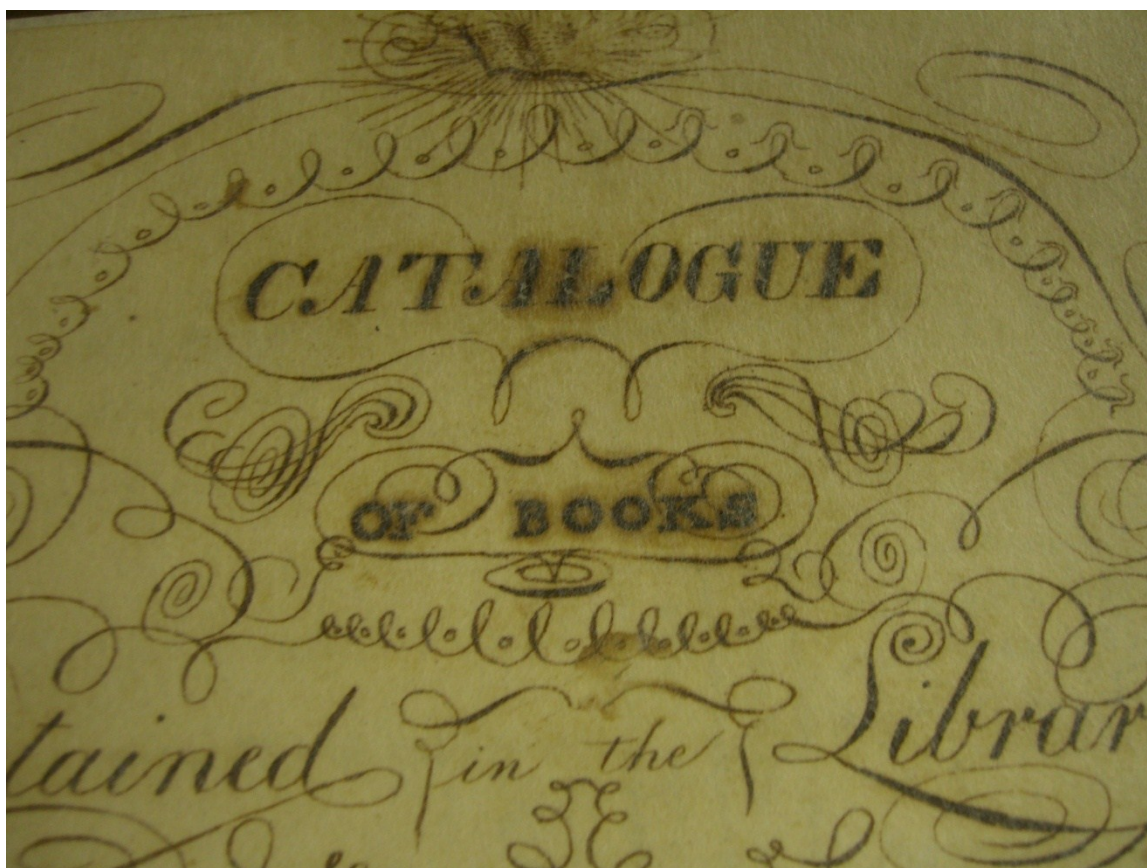


Figure 3.1 *Catalogue of the Library at Hayes*. Title Page. 1830. Hayes Collection. Wilson Library. UNC Chapel Hill. Author's photo.

library catalogs and book receipts, including one letter that briefly mentions reading in the library.⁹ The third library, preserved by Bennehan Cameron at Stagville, the Cameron family plantation near Durham, while smaller and less various than the other two, corroborates the extensive presence of reprints, and particularly British fiction, in private southern libraries.¹⁰ The content of each of these library catalogs suggests that the

⁹ Johnston's library catalogs, as well as his correspondence and book receipts, are part of the Hayes Collection at Wilson Library. The bulk of his library holdings, donated to UNC after his death, have been placed in a replica of his library at Wilson Library in the North Carolina Collection.

¹⁰ The *Catalogue of Volumes in the Cameron Library* is part of the North Carolina Collection at Wilson Library. The exact date of the handwritten catalog is unknown, but it is attributed to Bennehan Cameron (1854-1925), who inherited Stagville, the plantation that had been in the Bennehan-Cameron families since the eighteenth century, from his father in the 1880s ("The Camerons"). While this dates the catalog itself to the postbellum period, it is very likely that the library itself dated to the early national and antebellum periods given its holdings and Bennehan Cameron's preservationist impulse: when he moved to Stagville, he restored the family home's original furniture, and, according to a niece, he "like[d] to have things as near as possible like they used to be" ("The Camerons").

northeastern reprint industry controlled the southern print market during the antebellum era, and that British fiction, referenced extensively in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, was particularly popular among privileged southerners, making it more accessible to slave readers.

Northern Reprints in the Antebellum South

Much like slave literacy, southern libraries have been neglected in contemporary scholarship of antebellum literary culture. This, too, is the product of assumptions, in this case largely based upon the lack of publishers in the antebellum South. Publishing “did not play a large role in the literary culture of the South” (Green 121). Therefore, according to Jack Larkin, “print was marginal to the conduct of life for many,” but he gives no specific evidence for this claim (157). Larkin’s conclusion is problematic because it assumes that print must be produced locally in order for it to be a central part of everyday life. While this may have been true for some areas, it was certainly not true of most of the antebellum United States. Because of the centrality of reprinting to antebellum literary culture, even cities with numerous publishers like New York and Philadelphia relied upon imported print. Larkin’s reasoning, then, becomes circular: there were no publishers in the South, so southern people did not read; southern people did not read, so there were no publishers in the South.

In contrast, Michael O’Brien’s snapshot of southern literary culture in *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*, reveals that for privileged southern whites, print and literacy were a central aspect of life, and that southern literary culture was dependent upon northern publishers and transatlantic print. While printers were few in the South, booksellers were prevalent, supplying urban and

rural customers with books and periodicals from the North (476-77). Prominent southern men purchased print from southern bookstores, but also directly from northern publishers, who circulated their catalogs throughout the nation (487). Other print historians agree with O'Brien, showing that antebellum southerners were an important demographic for major northern publishers, connecting the South fully to publishing trends in the northeast. Madison asserts that a book "revolution" in the 1840s resulted from the growth of literacy, the advancement of publishing technology, and the raising of postage for periodicals, bringing about a rebounding of the book trade (Madison 23, 26). These books, the majority of which were British reprints, "served to cultivate a relatively large audience for new books" that cut across demographics in the North as well as the South (45). According to Michael Winship, a national book distribution system had taken hold by mid-century, making print from the northeast "readily accessible" to those who "had the means" to purchase it across the country ("National Book Trade System" 118). Print followed the same distribution routes as other goods and information (118-19), arriving from Britain and the Continent via "packet lines" that carried mail and book orders from Liverpool to primarily New York, but also Boston and Philadelphia (Winship, "International Trade in Books" 153). Imports and reprints alike were sent by northern publishers via waterways or, increasingly, railroad to western frontiers and the South. Philadelphia and New York firms transported books along canals and the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to reach Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, and New Orleans; they returned by traveling up the east coast (Green 120). Similarly, the expansion of railways in the antebellum era caused local print cultures to "[give] way before a deluge of rail-borne print materials from the three eastern publishing centers"

(Zboray xviii). As a result of these transportation innovations and southern demand for print, “the South was a place into which torrents of print poured,” according to O’Brien, and that print connected southern literary culture to the North and to Europe (488).

Significantly, two major innovations of northern publishing in the early national and antebellum periods—the British publishing agent and the traveling sales agent—linked British and continental texts to the South. Matthew Carey, for example, the successful Philadelphia-based publisher, was a forerunner in both innovations. An aggressive reprinter in the highly competitive market of the 1820s, Carey relied mainly upon the reprinting of British titles to establish his business in Philadelphia (Madison 9). He was the first American publisher to hire a British agent to procure “advance sheets” of British titles before his competitors, paying as much as £75 for them (10). Carey is perhaps best known for cornering the market on the early novels of Sir Walter Scott, the most reprinted novels in antebellum America, “printing them in record time and selling most of his editions before competing publishers issued rival printings” (Madison 10). Scott’s works were ubiquitous in the South, appearing in all three of the library catalogs I surveyed: in the Cameron catalog, they are listed as separate volumes, while in Wheeler and Johnston’s catalogs, they are listed as collected works.

That the works of Scott were a staple in each of these plantation libraries illustrates Carey’s other great innovation: the traveling sales agent. Carey’s most successful traveling salesman, Rev. Mason Locke Weems, flooded the coastal southern states with many of the same titles that sold in the North (Green 86-88). The texts that Carey procured in advance sheets from London were sold not only in Carey’s northern bookstores, but also along Weems’s traveling route, which included Maryland, Virginia,

the Carolinas, and Georgia. Weems's success persuaded other publishers to send agents into the South until the market became "saturated" with northern books (Zboray 40-41). Weems continued to be more successful, though, because he followed the route of the cotton market instead of the court route (Zboray 42). According to Zboray's map of Weems's travels, Weems most concentrated areas of business in the South were eastern North Carolina, Western South Carolina, northeastern Georgia, and eastern Virginia (43). It makes sense, then, that James Johnston's 1830 catalog of the library at Hayes in Edenton—within Weems's trade route—contains the item "Carey's Catalogue of Books," probably from the publisher, perhaps delivered by Weems or another traveling agent.

Carey's competitors and successors in the northern reprint trade continued supplying British texts to the South after Carey himself retired and the traveling sales agent system faded.¹¹ Philadelphia publisher Lippincott, for example, visited England in 1851 making connections with British firms and selling their books, and also "did a large share of his business with the southern states" in the 1850s, distributing books that were also available in his book emporium in Philadelphia (Madison 13-14). The Harpers, Carey's biggest competitor and the firm that made New York the center of American publishing from the 1830s onward, published primarily British fiction because it was most lucrative (Madison 21). They rivaled Carey for the first American editions of Scott and published British novels at a fraction of their cost in Britain, making these titles more widely available in America than Britain (Madison 22).¹² In the 1830s, they became the largest book publishing firm in America; significantly, 90% of their list was European in origin in the 1840s (23). This trend continued into the 1850s. In 1853, the firm had 1549

¹¹ According to O'Brien, urban bookstores and general stores became competition for traveling agents in the 1830s and '40s, especially because agents were sometimes seen as untrustworthy northerners (474,476).

¹² The Harpers, like Carey, employed an English agent: the publisher Sampson Low (Madison 26).

titles in 2028 volumes on its list; 827 of these titles were reprints (Madison 26). The firm had multiple vehicles for marketing British reprints, all of which were available nationally; *Harper's Magazine*, one of the most widely distributed literary magazines of the antebellum era, which initially contained anonymous British texts, is listed in Wheeler's catalog. To a lesser extent, Boston publishers also distributed their books to the South. By the 1850s, Phillips, Sampson & Co. began competing with New York publishers of cheap books with editions of classic authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Jonson, and Byron, all of whom appear with regularity in southern library catalogs (Madison 38). They also refused *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because they feared losing southern business, a significant indicator of the southern market (38).

“Unbounded” Transatlantic Texts in the Wheeler, Johnston, and Cameron Libraries

It is clear, then, that northern publishers and booksellers circulated their books in the South, discrediting the assumption that print was not a major part of southern life. A majority of the books that made their way from the North to the South were British and European reprints because, in the antebellum period, American publishing depended upon reprints to generate capital. But transatlantic reprints were important to the southern print trade for other reasons, as well. According to O'Brien, southern culture was both “national” and “postcolonial” in the early nineteenth century, meaning that while southerners espoused American political values, their “intellectual traditions continued to be formed mostly by the older cultures of Europe” and they “had a habit of presuming that [cultural] authority rested abroad” (4-5). As a result, “to most southerners, Madame de Staël mattered more than Ralph Waldo Emerson” (5). Toward the mid-nineteenth

century, this European intellectual and literary orientation may have continued to dominate because texts by European authors were not politically polarizing like many American-authored texts, a problem that grew in the 1840s and '50s with the rise of the abolition movement and states' rights initiatives. While the national distribution of British titles reprinted in the North had made similar titles available to different demographics, it did not create a monolithic response to these texts, as readers in different places and situations responded to the same texts in different ways (Zboray xviii). According to Zboray, American authors were not marketed in the South by northeastern publishers (12-13). Instead, Weems, for example, sold books in agreement with instead of antagonistic to local mindsets, focusing on "sure-fire sellers" such as "school books, sermons, Bibles, almanacs, reference works, histories, travelogues, and belles-lettres of well-known foreign authors" (54). The latter make up a substantial part of plantation libraries, including poetry, fiction, and memoirs of well-known British authors. Fiction, in particular, was "one of the most popular genres at midcentury" because it "transcended local realities to such a degree that it could sell widely to the scattered and heterogeneous antebellum reading public" (Zboray 81).

The Wheeler, Johnston, and Cameron library catalogs provide concrete evidence that titles from across the Atlantic—particularly *belles lettres*, but also works of history and philosophy—were far more popular in the South than American-authored texts. While there is some divergence in specific titles among the catalogs, each contains a wide array of genres, and a great majority of texts are British, and to a lesser extent, French and German, in origin. All three libraries contain the collected poems of Lord Byron, Goldsmith, and Robert Burns. They also include Shakespeare, either the collected works

or “beauties.” Numerous other British writers, such as Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, John Bunyan, Alexander Pope, John Milton, and the Romantic poets, appear in varying editions. Each catalog contain classical texts in translation such as Cicero, Virgil, and Horace, many by prominent English translators such as Pope and Dryden; Johnston lists Latin and Greek lexicons, suggesting that he also read the texts in their original languages. Many histories and biographies appear about the ancient world, Britain, and Europe, including several about the French Revolution: the Cameron catalog lists the memoirs of Marie Antoinette and Napoleon; Wheeler’s contains *Life of Napoleon* in addition to three histories of the French Revolution; Johnston includes De Stael’s *History of the French Revolution*. In addition to a fascination with recent French history, each catalog also reflects an interest in German prose, containing collections such as *Tales from the German* in Wheeler’s library. These miscellaneous texts, with the exception of a few works of American history, prayer books, textbooks, writings of prominent Americans such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, and a very brief selection of American *belles lettres* were transatlantic in origin.¹³

While the Johnston and Cameron catalogs make some attempt to organize this profusion of texts by genre, the same spirit of what Zboray calls “serendipity” that characterized northern bookstores ruled southern libraries. As Zboray argues, just as antebellum publishers were not always concerned with separating genres in their bookstores, the catalogers of these three libraries were more concerned with an individual mode of organization for each library (142). This means that, just as in northern bookstores, the titles in southern libraries were “unbounded” and even “undisciplined,”

¹³ James Fennimore Cooper’s novels and Washington Irving’s “romances” appear in Wheeler and Johnston’s catalogs.

with books of “wildly different genres” placed next to each other on the shelves and thus in the catalog (142; 154). In Wheeler’s library catalog, which is organized by case and sometimes, loosely, by genre, a volume entitled *Attorney’s Practice* appears next to a sensational novel entitled *Romance of the Harem*. Even when attempts at organization by genre are made, they are haphazard. For example, Case 5 of Wheeler’s library is classified as “Miscellaneous and Political” and contains Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, a book about phrenology, and a book about the American Constitution. While Johnston’s library at Hayes is cataloged alphabetically, and therefore appears far more orderly on the page, the alphabetical ordering allows disparate titles to appear near each other, such as *Arabian Nights Entertainments* and *Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (figure 3.2). At the beginning of the later Hayes catalog (undated), the cataloger attempts to organize the books by genre, but the category with the most entries is “Miscellaneous,” containing 416 books. The Cameron catalog is the most orderly, with twelve generic categories; however, this more rigid ordering requires some texts to be listed twice, such as *Edgeworth’s Dramas*, listed as both “Juvenile” and “Dramatic.” Attempts at order cannot banish the sense of serendipity present in these catalogs, the titles creating a narrative of their owner’s contact with print and inviting the reader to discover texts of various genres and origins.

Aristophanes Comedias, Græce et Latine, [editore Scaliger]		2	4
		5	5
B		142	
* Bacon's Works, translated by Shaw		3	8
Balance of Trade, Essay on, [advocates doctrines now exploded by Adam Smith, Say, et hoc genus omne] 1699		1	9
Balzac's Letters		1	4
* Banier's attempt to give a historical explication of the Greek Mythology		4	7
Barbour's Report about the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal		1	7
Barrington's Sketches of his Life and Times		4	2
Bartolini Anatomia		1	3
Bayard's Speech about the Judiciary		1	W
Beattie, Life of		1	6
Beaumont and Fletcher's Works		6	8
Beekman's Voyage to Bornec, 1718		1	8
Behn's Novels		1	W
Belgian Traveller		1	8
Belisarius		1	4
Belknap's History of N. Hampshire ✓		2	5
Bentley's Sermons		4	3
Benton's Speech on the Panama Mission		1	7
Benton's Report on the proposed amendment of the Constitution, as regards the election of Presidents		1	W
Beveridge's Religious Thoughts		1	9
Bibliotheca Biblica		1	3
Biblia Sacra, 1680		1	W
Bible, The		1	2

Figure 3.2 Page from Catalogue of the Library at Hayes. 1830. Hayes Collection. Wilson Library. UNC Chapel Hill. Author's photo.

The serendipity of southern book-buying and reading is further illustrated by James Johnston's book receipts and correspondence with booksellers in New York,

Baltimore, and Norfolk. A bachelor who had attended school in New York and New Jersey, Johnston traveled often and widely throughout the country. As a self-professed bibliophile, he purchased books when he traveled but also corresponded with booksellers by mail when at Hayes.¹⁴ Johnston, who meticulously saved many of his letters and business papers, kept receipts from several booksellers spanning 1813 through the late 1840s that have been preserved in the Hayes Collection. Receipts from William Boylan, W.B. Gilley of New York, Waters of Baltimore, and Barclay and Hardy Bros. of Norfolk reveal the miscellaneous nature of Johnston's reading habits, as well as how books found their way to Hayes plantation. In a receipt from Waters dated October 13, 1845, the *Life of Hamilton* is listed, as well as the French novel *Gil Blas* and a biography of Shakespeare, among other titles.¹⁵ Dated just two days later, a receipt from Barclay lists *Lincoln's Botany*, *Lyell's Geology*, two prayer books, *Eminent Men*, and writing supplies. Johnston's reading was clearly varied, as was his choice of bookseller.

The sense of serendipity in purchasing print is heightened by the unreliability of sending away for books instead of buying them in person from a book store. Interestingly, Johnston saved letters from an associate of W.B. Gilley regarding books that Johnston had ordered but that had not yet arrived in Edenton. Dated January 3, 1827 and written in an anxious tone, the letter claims that Gilley

was more particular in packing the case than he generally is; that every volume as it was placed in the box was called off from the list, and that he is confident they all went from hence. He also says that it is an unusual

¹⁴ Many prominent southern men followed this pattern, living part of their lives on rural plantations and part in southern, northern, and European cities (O'Brien 2).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Barnes lists *The Adventures of Gil Blas* as one of the most frequently reprinted novels in America between 1790 and 1840: thirteen editions appeared, as many as Scott's *Tales of My Landlord* (443).

thing for packages of books to be opened; that even in sending them from home [NY] to Philadelphia he has sometimes lost one or two volumes from the package. Every part of his shop, in which your order has been mislaid, has been searched, and no traces of them found.

This letter reveals the unreliability of the mail and the difficulty of transporting books from New York to North Carolina, but also implies that books Johnston had ordered had been lost before, as well as that Johnston was regarded as an important customer.

Johnston also saved letters from James Lenox, who appears from the content of the letters to be an importer of books who was also on friendly terms with Johnston. On Feb. 23, 1827, Lenox wrote to recommend a few books that later appear in the library catalog, such as *Rome in the Nineteenth Century*, *Continental Adventures*, and the novel *Almack's*, showing that Johnston's library was in part shaped by the taste (and the unofficial marketing) of a northern bookseller. Johnston's correspondence with New York and Baltimore-based booksellers provides a snapshot of how southern gentlemen supplied their libraries and how serendipity played a role in shaping these libraries, connecting them concretely with book selling and reading practices of the North.

Reprinted Transatlantic Fiction in the Wheeler, Johnston, and Cameron Libraries

The miscellaneous reading habits of the southern elite meant that rigid boundaries between fiction and non-fiction imposed by moralizing critics did not seem to play a major role in the shaping of these library catalogs, which listed the titles of many novels. This "unbounded" nature of southern libraries, particularly the extent of their fiction holdings, irked Robert Alan Spearman, whose unpublished thesis on the changing content

Hayes library remains one of the only scholarly works on the subject of plantation libraries to date.¹⁶ Tracking the growth of the library after James Johnston's takeover of the Hayes plantation in 1811, Spearman appears dismayed to discover that by the time of the 1830 catalog, the generic classification he calls "Social Matters and the Novel" increased by 650%, going from 27 titles to 180 and becoming the third largest generic category in the library (18).¹⁷ Many "gothic, sentimental, and historical romances" were added in the 1830s, Spearman admits. Some of these titles are recognizable today, including Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe's *Gaston de Blondeville*, Maria Edgeworth's *Tales of Fashionable Life*, and "nearly all" of Scott's novels, but most titles are now obscure. Spearman argues that the addition of these titles resulted from "continental Romanticism and its literary precursors [taking] eastern North Carolina by storm" (36). While Spearman notes the importance of these reprinted texts in southern culture, he nonetheless wonders, "Who...read all these romances? Were they read by both men and women, or was the audience primarily women? It takes a significant leap of imagination to think of James C. Johnston moving easily from some of the more 'manly' works in the collection to the romances of 'Perdita'" (40). Reflecting the aversion to and feminization of popular fiction prevalent among mid-twentieth century literary critics, Spearman cannot imagine Johnston, an educated bachelor, reading novels along with, say, Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* or Plutarch's *Lives*, but his distaste

¹⁶ Spearman's *Johnston Library at Hayes Plantation: The Character of the Eighteenth Century Library and Its Evolution in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (1988) is available in the North Carolina Collection at Wilson Library, UNC Chapel Hill.

¹⁷ These classifications were assigned by Stephen B. Weeks, who did some previous work on categorizing the library. In my opinion, they are suspect and may have been designed to obscure the amount of imaginative literature in the library. For example, another category entitled "Essays and General Literature" contained 280 titles and increased by 250% (Spearman 118).

nonetheless provides evidence for the prominent place of transatlantic fiction in Hayes Library.¹⁸

In fact, all three library catalogs contain a sizable collection of these “gothic, sentimental, and historical romances,” often the same titles, revealing that regardless of the gender of who was purchasing and reading these texts, they comprised a large percentage of private southern library holdings. All three libraries contained copies of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverly* novels, as well as other selected novels by Scott. The *Collected Works* of Swift, *Arabian Nights*, and *Don Quixote* appear in two out of the three catalogs, which is not surprising, given the popularity of these texts in Britain. While Scott is by far the most popular writer, Maria Edgeworth, Ann Radcliffe, Oliver Goldsmith, Benjamin Disraeli, and Charles Dickens appear in two of three catalogs. For example, Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Gaston de Blondville* appear in Wheeler’s and Johnston’s libraries, respectively. Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and the *Old Curiosity Shop* are listed in Wheeler’s library, but even the more limited Cameron catalog contains *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. These authors and titles appearing most frequently are no surprise, as they generally match national trends. According to Elizabeth Barnes, the most frequently reprinted novels in America between 1790 and 1840 include Swift’s *Robinson Crusoe* (33 editions), Scott’s *Tales of My Landlord* (13 editions), and Radcliffe’s *Romance of the Forest* (9 editions) (443). Similarly, Scott’s *Waverly* novels were the most frequently charged items at the New York Society Library

¹⁸While Johnston’s sisters did intermittently live at Hayes in the antebellum period, there is some evidence that Johnston himself chose and read the popular fiction in his library. In the previously cited letter, Lenox wrote an informal review of the novel *Almack’s* in 1827, praising it. The novel appears in the 1830 catalog. This reveals that Johnston and his male acquaintances were interested in and read popular fiction instead of relegating it to women. Similarly, Zboray’s study of the book borrowing habits of a brother and sister in New York reveal that both borrowed “serious” philosophical and historical works as well as fiction.

between 1854-56 (Zboray 173). Other authors appearing in the southern library catalogs were also among the most popular in Homer Franklin's Broadway bookstore in 1840: Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, Edgeworth, and Goldsmith, to name a few (140). The same popular transatlantic fiction widely read in the North was also, it appears, widely read in the South, as these three catalogs reveal.

Perhaps more interesting than the presence of the most popular novels, however, are those that have since faded into obscurity. Two of these novels—Scottish novelist Jane Porter's *Scottish Chiefs* and French writer Madame du Genlis's novel *Jane of France*—appear in all three library catalogs. Each of the three catalogs—including the Cameron catalog, which tends to be more conservative—contains a significant percentage of fiction that appears only once or, in a few cases, twice among the three catalogs. These novels, often listed anonymously with titles such as *Lady of the Manor*, *The Heir of Redclyffe*, *Married Life*, and *The Female Blue Beard*, appear to imitate the more widely read Gothic, sentimental, and romantic titles in the catalogs. The last title, *The Female Blue Beard*, appearing in Wheeler's catalog, was written by sensational French novelist Eugene Sue who, interestingly, became known for his use of Gothic tropes in his “mysteries of the city” novels that birthed a new genre spreading to Germany, London, and America. This genre became connected with politically radical authors in Britain and America who sought to upset social hierarchies and expose the vices of capitalism, such as working-class novelists George Lippard in Philadelphia and Ned Buntline in New York.¹⁹ Despite the aristocratic conservatism of southern slave owners like Wheeler, a variety of Sue's novels appear in his library catalog, representing

¹⁹ For more about Eugene Sue and American permutations of the mysteries of the city genre, see Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents* (Particularly chapter 6, “Mysteries and Mechanics of the City”) and David S. Reynolds's *George Lippard*.

an alternate, politicized use of the Gothic tropes found in more respectable fiction by British authors such as the Brontes, who also appear in Wheeler's catalog.²⁰ That the library catalogs contain multiple titles that came out of transatlantic traditions of the sentimental and sensational is important: literate slaves like Hannah Crafts would be able to access several examples of how the common tropes of these literary modes could be applied, as I will discuss further below.

From this examination of three southern library catalogs, it is clear that transatlantic fiction is central to each library's holdings, providing evidence that slaves reading their masters' books would have access to these texts. Yet it is difficult, at times, to determine whether the editions were directly imported from Britain or if they were reprinted, an important aspect of my claim that slaves were connected to a national literary culture defined by transatlantic reprinting. Evidence for the dominance of northern print in the South presented earlier in this chapter supports the notion that most of the British titles in these library catalogs were reprints, even though some privileged southern consumers continued the eighteenth-century practice of buying imported volumes.²¹ One way to estimate which novels in the catalogs were British imports and which were American-bound or reprinted is to examine the volume numbers.²² In the antebellum period, most current novels published in Britain were brought out in three volumes, called the "triple-decker" edition. Novels reprinted in America, on the other

²⁰ Sue's *Mathilda*, *The Wandering Jew*, and his series of "cardinal sins" novels are listed in Wheeler's catalog, as are Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* and *Jane Eyre*, as well as Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

²¹ Importing bound books from Britain became less popular in the antebellum era, since it was less expensive for American publishers to simply reprint British titles. However, the practice endured to a certain extent in the South among wealthy bibliophiles. O'Brien states that most southern bookstores imported reprints from the North, but that "a few luxuriant stores" imported books directly from London and Paris (477). Charleston gentleman Mitchell King, for example, bought his books from local bookstores, Philadelphia bookstores, and "occasionally, directly from Europe" (483).

²² I want to stress that this method is only a means of estimation, and not a fail-safe method of determining the provenance of the fiction in these libraries.

hand, appeared most frequently in two-volume editions, and increasingly from the 1830s onward, in single-volume editions priced at \$.50 to \$1.00 (Green 119).²³ While the Cameron catalog does not note volume numbers, Johnston's catalog lists them for nearly every title, and Wheeler's does so occasionally.²⁴ Based on thirty-eight works of fiction with known volume numbers from the Johnston and Wheeler catalogs, only five were printed in three-volume editions, while eighteen were printed in two-volume editions and ten in one-volume editions. Five titles include more than three volumes, but three of these were collected works most likely American in origin. Therefore, at least twenty-eight of the thirty-eight titles are most likely American reprints of British and continental titles. Most of the fiction in the Johnston and Wheeler libraries, based on this evidence, was reprinted, while a small percentage was imported. The prevalence of reprints in these libraries is important because it links southern literary culture materially to northern literary culture, suggesting that the reprint industry supplied relatively the same books to each region. This means that readers of these books—masters and slaves—participated in a national literary culture defined by a trade in transatlantic texts, particularly fiction.

The content of the Wheeler, Johnston, and Cameron libraries—all privately owned by prominent North Carolina land and slave owners—illustrate the specific texts that circulated in the South and where they came from. Therefore, they serve an important function in determining how slaves could have had access to the transatlantic reprint industry even though they were unable to play the traditional role of consumer in the print marketplace. Despite the lack of a southern publishing industry, a largely

²³ Harper and Carey were the first to publish single-volume novels in 1836 (Green 119).

²⁴ For a few entries, Wheeler provides the place and year of publication: for example, his *Works of Sir Walter Scott* in six volumes was published in New York in 1818; *Beauties of the Waverly Novels*, Boston 1828; *Gulliver's Travels*, London 1805.

agrarian economy, and a high illiteracy rate among poor whites, print “poured into” the South from across the Atlantic, mainly by way of northeastern publishers and booksellers, into the libraries of privileged southerners. The centrality of the northeastern reprint industry to southern book buyers meant that many of the same texts circulating in the North were also prominent in the southern market, particularly transatlantic novels, which were popular in the South given the Europhilia of the southern aristocracy, and the perceived distance of these texts from an American political context. The arrangement of southern libraries, like northern bookstores, reflects a sense of serendipity in encountering and reading books, highlighting a high regard for fiction alongside other, more distinguished types of *belles lettres*. This serendipity becomes particularly important as I transition into the underground portion of the journey of reprinted texts from northeastern publishers to slaves: chance encounters with the master’s print are also characterized by serendipity, with the added element of subterfuge. In the second section of this chapter, I examine slaves’ representations of encounters with print that are made possible by their masters’ book ownership, arguing that slaves’ close proximity to their masters created the potential of slaves reading in the master’s library. These library catalogs, when viewed beside testimonies, letters, and narratives by slaves, provocatively suggest an underground means for learning and developing reading and writing skills that has, as a result of its characteristic serendipity and subterfuge, remained all but invisible.

II. Serendipity and Subterfuge in the Master’s Library: The Material Presence of Slave Readers and Gothic Representations of Reading in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*

Upon discovering *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* in 2002, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. realized that if the narrative was indeed written by a slave or a former slave, it would dramatically change the direction of scholarship about antebellum black literacy and

literary activity. As the essays in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman's Narrative* explore, the narrative directly alludes to British novels read widely in the antebellum era, such as *Bleak House* and *Jane Eyre*, and also more generally incorporates the literary conventions of sentimental and sensational fiction, particularly the Gothic. The narrative so clearly references the transatlantic fiction being distributed throughout the nation that Hollis Robbins calls the text “an amalgamation of the era’s greatest hits” (82). This is a weighty statement considering assumptions about low slave literacy that forces a revision of those assumptions—if the text is historically valid.

Was Hannah Crafts really a slave, and if so, how did she have access to the novels she had so clearly read and assimilated in her narrative? The first of these questions initially concerned Gates, and the research that he commissioned to verify the text reveals that the narrative was written in the mid- to late 1850s by a woman with limited means and seemingly self-educated.²⁵ Furthermore, Hannah Crafts was, most likely, a pseudonym for a slave in the household of John Hill Wheeler, the North Carolinian

²⁵ Joe Nickell, an “investigator and historical document examiner,” conducted a thorough examination of the text in June of 2001 (see Appendix A of the narrative). Looking at paper, ink, handwriting, erasures and corrections, binding, vocabulary and spelling, and other textual matters, Nickell concludes that the text is “an authentic manuscript of circa 1853-1861” that is “apparently written by a relatively young, African-American woman who...had obvious literary skills, although eccentric punctuation and occasional misspellings suggest someone who struggled to become educated” (333). A few findings that led to these conclusions are of particular interest to me. When looking at the handwriting, Nickell calls it “serviceable...neither an untutored hand nor an example of elegant penmanship, and it lacks the diminutive size sometimes affected by ladies” and was “produced with relative slowness”; similarly, the “absence of archaic forms” of penmanship indicate that “the writer was relatively young” (316). Eccentric spelling and punctuation indicate “a measure of unsophistication,” but are also potentially connected to the author’s reading of English and European texts (317, 325). This “admixture of good vocabulary skills and occasional poor spelling” are “consistent with someone who had struggled to learn,” making the progression of the narrative’s main character from illiterate slave girl to teacher “a credible personal achievement” for the author (325-6). And finally, evidence that the author used sewing scissors and a thimble to manually revise the text in many places provides evidence that the author is a female and probably a domestic, as she uses economy in paper, ink, and other writing supplies (320). I return to these details later in the chapter.

plantation owner and politician who is called “Mr. Wheeler” in the narrative. In fact, she may have been the Jane Johnston who escaped from Wheeler while accompanying him on a trip to New York in 1855 and who appears as a character in the text (Gates lxi).²⁶ After examining Wheeler’s diary, Gates concludes that “the portrait Crafts draws of Wheeler and the portrait that Wheeler unwittingly sketches of himself are remarkably similar” (lxxii). More importantly, the fiction that the narrative directly references—the era’s “greatest hits”—can be found in Wheeler’s 1850 library catalog, as was verified soon after the manuscript’s discovery by Bryan C. Sinche, who compiled a brief list of the library’s belletristic holdings. Gates suggests that the correlation between the narrative and the library “provides a rare opportunity for scholars to trace with great specificity the echoes, allusions, and borrowings” that the narrative employs (357).

While Gates is certainly correct, he does not identify a more basic and compelling issue—what the narrative tells us about how a slave could have had access to and comprehend these texts at all. The close correlation between the texts in Wheeler’s library and Crafts’s narrative insinuates that *if* she was enslaved when writing the

²⁶ There are a few major speculations about the actual identity of Hannah Crafts. The case for Jane Johnson, initially posited by Gates, is thoroughly examined and validated by Katherine E. Flynn, who calls the evidence “circumstantial but strongly suggestive” (397). Nina Baym, on the other hand, finds the evidence pointing to Hannah Vincent, a free black woman from New Jersey, more convincing, meaning, in her words, that “one cannot generalize about slave literacy” based on the text, which she calls wholly a work of fiction (316). Conversely, William Andrews, comparing the ending of the narrative to the endings of other black-authored texts of the era, asserts that while the text can be considered autobiographical, the ending may be fictionalized because Crafts never achieved freedom but wrote the text while still enslaved. All of these theories are partially based in the few historical records of slaves and free blacks, as well as partially speculative, intuitive, and imaginative. Because African Americans were considered property or simply inferior in the antebellum era, it is my contention that we cannot rely upon historical records about black individuals to verify the identity of Hannah Crafts. Instead, as I make clear in this chapter, I begin with surviving texts—*The Bondswoman’s Narrative* and library catalogs—as the primary source of information about the potentialities of slave literacy. For this reason, I am more concerned with Joe Nickell’s authentication report about the text than deciding who Hannah Crafts really was. Similarly, I am less concerned about establishing the genre of the text than Baym and other scholars, particularly because genre was understood much differently in the antebellum era. I talk more about the identity and genre argument in the final section of this chapter.

narrative or soon before writing it, Crafts must have had access to the library. How could this have happened in a culture that frowned upon and often punished slave literacy? While the answer to this question cannot be conclusive and must, by its very nature, be circumstantial, I contend that *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, corroborated with slave letters and testimonies, reveals that slaves' access to their masters' libraries was serendipitous as well as surreptitious. By this I mean that slave access to plantation libraries was tied very closely to material circumstances of everyday life in a plantation house, namely, the close proximity of house slaves to their master's belongings because of the nature of their labor—a situation that Crafts portrays for us in the narrative. Additionally, the absence of masters—particularly those like Wheeler and Johnston who continually traveled—widened the access of slaves to the library. Similarly, the presence of the books themselves—the titles available, their organization—becomes part of the serendipity and subterfuge of slaves in their masters' libraries, making slave reading a haunted and haunting act. To illustrate how slaves had access to these libraries, I will examine *The Bondwoman's Narrative's* representation of reading as a Gothic act in context with other representations of slave reading—the letters of James Johnston's slaves to their master and other slave testimonials. Together, these artifacts of slave literacy reveal that slave access to private southern libraries was a reality, even if the scope of this activity remains unknown, and that the fictional holdings of these libraries gave slaves a language with which to represent their experiences and their reading, in particular.

Serendipity and Subterfuge: Slave Testimonies about Underground Literacy

White surveillance of slave activities was a constant reality in the everyday lives and labor of slaves, even though the parameters of that surveillance differed from place to place, master to master. The impact of this surveillance on slave literacy becomes apparent when examining attitudes toward and prohibitions of slave literacy among whites in the South in comparison with the documented literary activity of slaves. While enslaved African Americans were, according to Barbara Sicherman, the only group in antebellum America for which literacy was considered “inherently dangerous” (280), slaveholding whites had differing attitudes about slave literacy that depended more upon their personal convictions than political enforcement. As Janet Duitsman Cornelius has shown, the “sweeping extent” of anti-literacy legislation has been “exaggerated,” as only five states (Virginia, North and South Carolina, Louisiana, and Georgia) had laws that outright prohibited teaching a slave to read (33). Even in those states, anti-literacy laws had very little control in private spaces such as the home and even the church (34). Evangelical religious views, in particular, influenced many whites to ignore the law: missionaries preached that literacy should not be withheld from slaves, and “the influence of this message...was pervasive,” particularly in the private teaching of slave literacy, or at least in white complicity with slave literacy (36). Ministers and other teachers continued to teach “surreptitiously” or “winked at the practice within their churches” after the passing of anti-literacy laws (44, 46).

While the political atmosphere that created anti-literacy sentiment remained a threat, with its “demagoguery, restrictive legislation, lack of financial support, subtle threat, and overt violence” aimed at those who continued to teach slaves and free blacks to read, very little official punishment was recorded for breaking anti-literacy laws

(Cornelius 44, 34). As a petition filed against the law in South Carolina stated, it was “impracticable” even if whites complied because “hundreds of slaves could already read and it was impossible for masters to prevent them” from continuing to do so and to teach others (57). The lack of control of slave literacy even after the crackdowns of the 1830s resulted in the continued growth of that literacy throughout the South. According to Cornelius, “[slave] reading and writing took place in every region of the South and on small farms and large plantations, small towns and cities (7).

The inability to control slave literacy is closely tied to the everyday contexts in which it was practiced. Because print and, in many cases, schooling were a part of everyday life in plantation houses and throughout southern communities, slaves came into contact with print and literacy in the course of their daily labor. Domestic spaces were the established scene for teaching basic literacy to white children in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and had been since the seventeenth century (Zboray 84). In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the home continued to be the place where “the threshold from basic literacy to fluent comprehension” was crossed, particularly in the rural South where young children of wealthy landowners had inconsistent access to schools (87). Private libraries, reflecting this trend, contained textbooks to teach young children basic literacy, and schoolrooms were sometimes set up in the plantation house.²⁷ While serving white children, house slaves had access not only to books but also literacy lessons, as several testimonies from the Federal Writer’s Project interviews attest.²⁸

²⁷ Each of the three library catalogs includes textbooks for the teaching of basic literacy with titles such as *Carpenter’s Spelling Book* (in Cameron), *Dialogue for Schools* (in Wheeler), and *Grammatical Exercises* (in Johnston).

²⁸ The Federal Writer’s Project interviews of former slaves from 17 states were taken during the mid-1930s and are now collected in 17 volumes in the Rare Book Division of the Library of Congress. George P. Rawick reprinted many of these in his multi-volume series, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, published in the 1970s. While these anecdotal testimonies of individuals who experienced

Taking advantage of the context of his work, the former slave William Head said that he listened to spelling matches when he took his young master's lunch to him at school; he then went to the library with his master's children at night and read while they did their homework (Cornelius 77). Milly Green, who served as a nanny to her master's children, reported that she kept a school book hidden in her dress and asked the children questions about their lessons when they returned from the schoolroom (77). Moses Slaughter said that his mother, a house slave, would keep her master's daughter's place as she read, learning the text herself and then teaching her children to read later (77). Belle Myers learned the alphabet from playing with blocks with her master's baby and honed her literacy by secretly reading Webster's "blue-back" speller (71). Similarly, George Moses Horton, a North Carolina slave, "conceived an anxiety for books" as a child and taught himself to read with the help of white children and "old parts of spelling books," but never learned to write (Jackson 54). Instead, he composed poems and hymns in his head, reciting them while he sold fruit on his master's behalf to students at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who paid him to compose poems for them (56).²⁹ Horton, like Head, Green, Slaughter, and Myers, took advantage of his close proximity to white education in order to learn and practice literacy. The context of slave labor, because of its intimate connection to the daily lives of whites, also became the context of slave literacy,

slavery mainly in the 1850s have limitations—for instance, Rawick notes that people were not chosen randomly for interviews, but volunteered or were previously known by the interviewers—they reveal much about the daily lives of slaves, including the "network of communications" that connected enslaved communities and "ways of understanding and dealing with the slaves' daily accommodations to their conditions and...with their resistances and rebellions" (Rawick xviii, xix). The examples quoted here are from Cornelius's extensive survey of the interviews.

²⁹ Leon Jackson asserts that Horton's poems participated in a "black market" because he, a slave, was being paid for them, but that Horton's poems are also "disembedded" from his authorial control because he could not write them down himself, and so depended upon white students and professors' wives to do so. See Jackson's *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (2008), chapter 2: "The Black Bard and the Black Market."

prompting Thomas C. Leonard to state that slaves had more extensive access to print than most poor southern whites (20).

Other FWP interviewees related that some masters sanctioned and even provided for their slaves' education on their own property, using their own books. Charlie Hudson's master in Georgia set up a school for his slaves in his gin house and hired a white man to teach them; when he received threats from night riders, he built a secretive brush arbor so that lessons might continue (65). Paul Jenkins testified that his father's owners taught him to read and let him borrow books, even after they set him free (75). Sarah Grimke, who would become a famous abolitionist, taught her maid to read at night before bedtime in Charleston (76). William Freeman, a white "outsider," taught slaves to read and write in the Alabama woods (75). Young white women taught literacy in "Sunday schools" on their plantations in North Carolina, according to Squire Dowd, a former slave who attended one with fifty other slaves (76). In other cases, white children of plantation owners played an important role in actively teaching slaves to read: Tab Gross, for example, a former slave from Maryland, paid his master's son to teach him (64).

Many masters, even if they allowed or encouraged their slaves to read, remained silent about the issue and hid evidence of their slaves' literacy. Others changed their minds about educating their slaves in fear of punishment, as Frederick Douglass famously documented in his 1845 narrative. James Johnston of Hayes, however, despite the 1830 North Carolina law that forbade teaching literacy or providing books to slaves (Cornelius 33), saved letters written to him by several of his slaves. While Johnston does not discuss his slaves' education in the letters or elsewhere, their existence and content

reveals that Johnston encouraged his slaves to become literate and, in at least one case, to make use of his library at Hayes to do so. These letters, in context with Johnston's library catalog and receipts, discussed earlier in the chapter, provide rare historical evidence of how slaves could access their master's library.

A "moderate" southern landowner, Johnston owned hundreds of slaves who labored at Hayes and two other plantations, yet was "ambivalent" about the institution itself (Zehmer 75). He treated his slaves mildly, "considered" freeing them on several occasions, and can be viewed as "representative of slave owners who knew slavery was wrong and should be abolished, but could not face the practical and pecuniary problems of giving up an established way of life" (75). Johnston's surviving papers in the Hayes Collection provide evidence of his concern for his slaves' livelihood. He records the purchase of their provisions, trusting slaves themselves to purchase what they needed and allowing them to raise and sell their own crops for cash (*Hayes Collection* 6). Several male slaves had positions of authority on Johnston's plantations, including Peter, who worked as the overseer at Poplar Plains, one of Johnston's ancillary plantations, and wrote weekly reports to Johnston "in a good hand and with better spelling and grammar than many of Johnston's white correspondents"—including his nephew Thompson N. Johnston, whom Johnston reprimanded for his poor penmanship (Zehmer 79).³⁰ During Johnston's many absences from Hayes, he "left the slaves at Hayes alone with little or no white supervision," trusting them to care for his house and properties on their own (*Hayes Collection* 6).

³⁰ One of the great ironies that emerges from the Johnston collection is that Johnston's letters from his slaves reveal that he trusted them more than the relatives whom he educated and patronized. This becomes painfully evident when placing the letters side by side.

This combination of a moderate and distant master and relatively independent and literate slaves left with free access to one of the preeminent libraries in antebellum North Carolina would be enough to suggest that Johnston's slaves read his books, but the letters themselves confirm this. Letters from at least eight of Johnston's slaves are contained in the Hayes Collection: in addition to Peter, slaves named Sam, Aaron, Margaret, Eliza, Betty, Young Ben, and Nelson wrote at least once to Johnston during his fifty-year tenure as their master.³¹ The letters as a body provide significant insights about the nature of the writers' relationship with Johnston. For instance, the women, all of whom appear to be house slaves, address Johnston with affection, write informally of how the "people" are faring in his absence, and include the surname Johnston in their signatures, while the male slaves write more formally, address mainly plantation business, and use only their first names in their signatures.³² The differences that I am most interested in, however, are those concerning penmanship and style. There is quite a disparity in the writing skills of each slave, suggesting that Johnston did not have a formal school for his slaves, but left them to educate themselves. Peter, who wrote the most frequently to Johnston and most likely had to write often in his capacity as overseer, unsurprisingly exhibits the most correct grasp of grammar, punctuation, and penmanship. Until 1851, Peter's letters look very much alike: he dates the letters but does not set the greeting apart from the body of

³¹ Interestingly, Zehmer does not mention Margaret in his overview of the slave letters; I stumbled across her correspondence while looking for letters from Peter and Aaron. This leads me to believe that there may be other letters from slaves in the collection that were perhaps overlooked. For instance, I saw several letters from another woman who spoke of traveling with the "people" to Nags Head for the summer (where the Johnstons vacationed) and mentioned relatives that appear to be slaves. More investigation is needed.

³² In her commentary on enslaved women's letters to their masters, Dorothy Sterling notes that "expressions of affection" were often, but not always, self-serving" (51). As an example of this, Sterling provides letters from Lucy Skipwith to her master John Hartwell Locke in which she "formally acknowledged his superior knowledge and power" and "proceeds to manipulate him in order to gain favors for friends and punishment for enemies" (53). This dynamic appears to be at work in Johnston's slaves' letters, as well.

the letter, nor the signature. His cursive is legible, but his writing contains a few spelling and grammar errors, as well as typos. These are more pronounced in some letters, as if he were writing these in a hurry. In his letter dated October 19, 1851, however, Peter appears more formal in his formatting: he sets “master” apart from the body as well as his signature, to which he adds, “your obedient and [] servant” and a flourish under his name. This reveals that, over time, Peter gained confidence in his literacy and adopted more of the conventions of letter-writing employed by whites. While Peter never mentions his reading habits—his letters to Johnston are terse and businesslike—it appears through his improvement in writing that reading has played a part in his evolution, as well.

On the other hand, letters from Aaron, a house slave at Hayes, have a much more dramatic tone but contain far more stylistic errors. Aaron’s letters are also ostensibly about business, albeit that of the plantation house, and he follows a formula, as well. He usually begins with a statement about taking his pen in hand: “I your servant Aaron has taken my pen in hand to let you no how I am and all the people at hayes is very well...” (July 23, 1850); “Your ondiserving servant has taken His liberty to write you a few lines” (July 1851); and, “My faiful master, I took the Liberty to write you a few lines to let you know how all is at home” (Aug. 28, 1850; figure 3.3). His letters include commentary

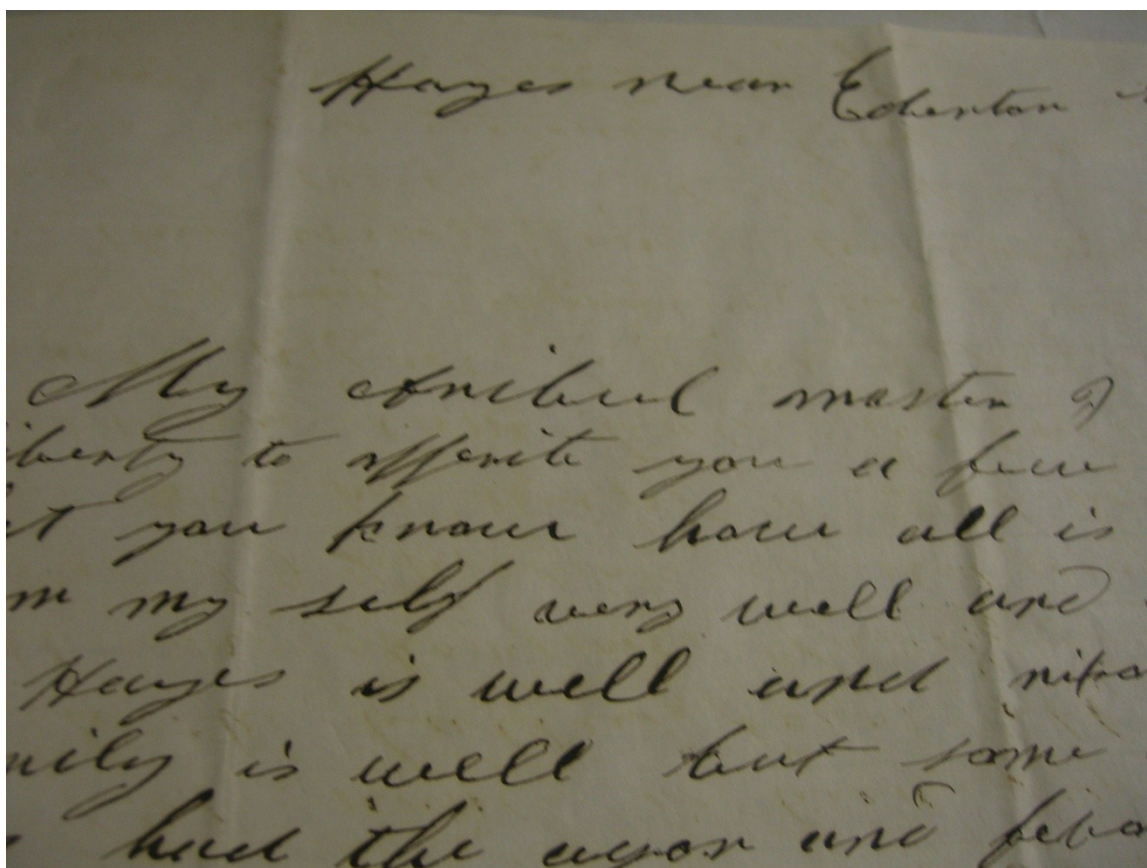


Figure 3.3 Letter from Aaron of Hayes. Unpublished. August 28, 1850. Hayes Collection. Wilson Library. UNC Chapel Hill. Author's photo.

about the health of the “people” at Hayes and salutations and well wishes from them. In a few letters, Aaron mentions helping Aunt Maria to clean the house (Oct. 5, 1850, Oct. 14, 1850). Significantly, in a letter dated July 23, 1850, Aaron mentions dusting Johnston’s books: “I am up Dis time dusken Off your books a korden to your word.” Unfortunately, because of ghost writing and poor spelling, the next sentence is difficult to discern, but appears to indicate that Aaron has also been reading in the library: “I am gowen aben my reads the second time.” Might “gowen aben my reads” (or, going about my reading) mean that Aaron is educating himself in Johnston’s library? The improvement of his writing over time suggests that this is the case. While specifics are uncertain, it seems that Aaron pairs his labor—cleaning the library—with his literacy, revealing that, in this

case, slave access to the library in the context of everyday life leads to slave reading. While Eliza, Margaret, and Betty—also house slaves at Hayes—do not specifically mention reading in the library, their writing proficiency suggests that they, too, made use of Johnston’s books.³³ The ghost of slave readers materializes in Aaron’s letter, providing evidence of how one slave—and, in all likelihood, his fellow house slaves—had serendipitous access to a library with a large selection of titles.

While Johnston’s permissive environment allowed his slaves free access to his library and thus to literacy, most slaves had to learn to read and acquire reading materials in secret and lived in fear of punishment, according to Cornelius’s survey of slave testimonials about literacy. Anti-literacy laws, even if they lacked official power, held “symbolic” power for whites and slaves alike. This meant that lessons in literacy, for slaves, were also lessons in secrecy. The majority of slave narratives and testimonials that depict literacy emphasize both serendipity and subterfuge: slaves relied upon the context of everyday life to provide them with texts and education, while they relied upon their wits to keep their literacy a secret. The FWP interviews depict many acts of serendipity and subterfuge in the process of learning to read. Some of these acts occur in broad daylight amidst the labor that slaves were expected to perform. John Irvine, a slave in Virginia, would procure his master’s children’s books and read them while waiting with the horse and carriage (74). Lucius Holsey, a house slave, sold rags to buy a speller and taught himself to read by dismantling it, folding pages into pocket-sized cards, and memorizing them while waiting in the carriage, running errands, or working in the garden or dining room (68). Many of these acts had to occur under the cover of darkness—in the

³³ Eliza, in particular, had excellent writing skills: her grammar and spelling are nearly flawless, even though she closes her letter by apologizing for her mistakes: “I hope master will excuse all blunders and mistakes.”

library, the slave quarters, and even the woods at night. Referring to herself and the other slaves on her plantation, Jenny Proctor said, “We slips around and gits hold of dat Webster’s old blue back speller and we hides it til way in de night and den we lights a little pine torch and studies that spellin’ book. We learn it too” (qtd. in Corneius 74). John Sella Martin, a hotel slave, learned how to read from listening to spelling bees and reading street signs when running errands, but only realized he had become literate when a few other slaves dragged him into the woods at night and asked him to read a newspaper article to them (69, 71). At other times, a master’s carelessness with print within his home would allow slaves access to it. Mitchell King, a Charleston slave owner, wrote that his library had grown so large and disorderly that “my books are rife in every nook of my house” (qtd. in O’Brien 490). This provides a means for slaves to read print that had been “left lying about,” even if the master forbade it (Rawick 108).

The role of serendipity and subterfuge in a slave’s reading habits is corroborated by published, full-length slave narratives that have become well-known to literary scholars. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, he (through Thomas Gray’s pen) describes learning to read as the natural outgrowth of his “restless, inquisitive and observant” mind: “I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet—but...one day, when a book was shewn to me to keep from crying, I began spelling the names of different objects” (250). “This learning,” he continues, “was constantly improved at all opportunities...whenever an opportunity occurred of looking at a book, when the school children were getting their lessons, I would find many things...” (250). Raised a slave after Nat Turner’s rebellion caused increased the policing of slave literacy, Frederick Douglass continued his abbreviated reading lessons through “various stratagems,” and

despite the fact that he was “narrowly watched” in the house, he “got hold of a book entitled *The Columbian Orator*,” a volume containing reprints of great speeches from across the Atlantic (31-32). Douglass writes, “Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book” (32). While he provides no details on where the book came from or where he read it, he makes it clear that he practiced literacy while working. For instance, his “most successful” plan to continue learning to read was to befriend white boys in the streets of Baltimore while running errands, carrying a book with him and trading bread for reading lessons (32). Similarly, William Wells Brown wrote of briefly being hired out to the abolitionist printer Elijah P. Lovejoy, later murdered by an angry mob for his views. While Wells Brown worked in the printing office of the *St. Louis Times*, Lovejoy apparently allowed him to read, for Wells Brown writes, “I am chiefly indebted to him, and to my employment in the printing office, for what little learning I obtained while in slavery” (383). This brief education in literacy made such an impression on Wells Brown that one of his first actions after finding regular employment as a free man was to “purchase some books, and at leisure moments perused them with considerable advantage to myself” (422). Like Aaron of Hayes, Turner, Douglass, and Wells Brown practiced literacy in the context of everyday tasks, even though they were discouraged from doing so, illustrating how serendipity and subterfuge characterized slave literacy.³⁴

The constant threat of severe punishment and evidence of this punishment did not thwart the pervasiveness of black literacy, but it did render literacy a dangerous act—one

³⁴ At this point, I want to highlight that all of these examples of slave literacy, from Aaron of Hayes to Douglass, provide representations of literacy in progress. At what point during this progression from illiteracy to literacy could a slave be considered “literate”? The difficulty of providing a definitive line by which to gauge literacy highlights the importance of semi-literacy as a legitimate phase of practicing literacy, particularly for those who learned to read over a span of several years and perhaps never learned to write.

that could result in violence, dismemberment, and even death. “Night riders” threatened Charlie Hudson’s slave school by leaving an empty coffin outside and later burned down the brush arbor (Cornelius 65). Similarly, Henry Bibb, in his narrative, recounts that a “Sunday” school, in which a poor white girl taught slaves to read, was broken up by patrollers (445). Patrollers often invaded slave cabins looking for print and letters (65). If slaves were caught reading or in the possession of print, they could be punished with beating or amputation. FWP Interviews from throughout the South testify that fingers were mutilated or cut off to keep slaves from writing and as a symbolic warning to keep other slaves from practicing literacy (66). Henry Nix said that his uncle, after being caught with a book, had his forefinger amputated to the first joint in order to set an example for the other slaves (66). Enoch Golden, who was well-known for his knowledge and literacy, confessed on his deathbed, according to another slave, that he had “been the death o’ many [n----r] ‘cause he taught so many to read and write” (qtd. in Cornelius 78).

The act of reading, with its constant threat of violent punishment, became intertwined with the very texts that slaves were reading: these grisly punishments bear disturbing resemblance to the horrific acts depicted in the sensational fiction on the shelves of plantation libraries. The transatlantic fiction that made up such a sizeable portion of libraries like the Wheeler and Johnston libraries—from the overtly Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe to the urban Gothic of Eugene Sue to social critique novels of Dickens that incorporated Gothic elements—portrayed acts considered “unspeakable” by polite society using suspense and horror as a means of social critique (Goddu 10).³⁵

³⁵ According to Robert Miles, the Gothic wrestles with a “theory of historical causation...imagining how evil arises out of the acts of well-intentioned agents...or how past violence reproduces itself in the present” (207). Both Miles and Goddu interpret Gothic fiction as a venue of social critique, not simply as titillating entertainment.

Placing young women of uncertain origin at the mercy of aristocratic villains in the setting of haunted mansions and abbeys, sentimental, sensational, and Gothic novels revealed the excesses of the aristocracy and exposed the vulnerability of women within a patriarchal European class system. Depicting murder, bloody corpses, violent sexuality, and maintaining the reader's constant feeling of suspense, novels with Gothic elements recreated what some slave readers experienced daily and that, for them, infused the act of reading itself. One of many everyday acts that could cause slaves harm at the hands of whites, reading became an "unspeakable" act that, as *The Bondwoman's Narrative* reveals, can only be uttered through the form and language of fiction, allowing Crafts to "speak the unspeakable" about slave literacy (Goddu 10). In referencing the fiction owned by her master in her writing, Crafts, like Aaron of Hayes, offers a glimpse of a slave reader haunting her master's library, drawing an explicit connection between the Gothic elements of transatlantic fiction and the realities of underground slave literacy.

A Close Reading of Gothic Reading in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

From start to finish, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is implicitly and explicitly concerned with reading, portraying Hannah, the enslaved heroine, as a shrewd reader of people and texts, which ultimately results in her freedom and employment as a teacher at the narrative's end. In order to depict Hannah as a reader, the narrative employs the conventions of Gothic and sentimental fiction found in Wheeler's library to first narrate Hannah's surreptitious literary education and then show how that education ultimately enables her to expose the hidden evils of the institution of slavery and to escape them. According to Robbins, "the novel has everything" that characterizes the transatlantic

fiction found in Wheeler's library: "the mysterious old house; the portrait gallery; the questionable parentage plot; the escape; the imprisonment; ... the ghosts; the documents; the disguises; the injustices; the pranks; the political asides; the revenge; ... the final scene of domestic tranquility" (82).

Containing these "highlights of nineteenth-century literature" as well as "faux-erudite allusions to literary greats" (Hollis 82), the narrative's implicit and explicit depictions of reading are specific references to Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, which depicts reading in strikingly similar ways. One of the most celebrated novels of its era, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was widely reprinted in America in the early nineteenth century and appears in Wheeler's 1850 library catalog (Castle xx). The story of Emily, a young woman thrust into the clutches of an evil aristocrat, Montoni, and filled with the Gothic elements listed above, the novel, like the *Bondwoman's Narrative*, straightforwardly depicts its characters reading transgressively, but also references Radcliffe's own literary influences while doing so.³⁶ As Terry Castle points out in her introduction to the novel, it "samples" well-known British poets in "formal poetic epigraphs" heading each chapter in order to "invest [the] narrative with a kind of supplemental poetic authority" (xiii).³⁷ Crafts borrows this practice, using quotations mainly from the Bible to begin nearly every chapter. Yet Crafts also adapts Radcliffe's more subtle, sophisticated portrayal of reading and its social significance by embedding the act of reading in passages that reference the author's literary influences. Just as

³⁶ Terry Castle states that while *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is Gothic in the sense that it "caters in parts to a decadent late-eighteenth-century taste for things gloomy, macabre, and medieval," but that the novel also contains the Romantic, the sentimental, and even satire (vii-xi). Like the *Bondwoman's Narrative*, the *Mysteries of Udolpho* incorporates several popular fictional modes.

³⁷ Radcliffe was the first British novelist to engage in this practice, which became widely copied by other British novelists in the nineteenth century.

Radcliffe's heroine, Emily, is shaped by what and how she reads, Hannah's reading shapes the representation of her character—and the character of the narrative. The opening chapters of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* exemplify this: Hannah's depiction of learning to read in secret is tied to her acute powers of observation and the distinctly transatlantic Gothic elements that appear early in the text. At the same time, Crafts' portrayal of the narrative's heroine directly references passages from not only the *Mysteries of Udolpho*, but also Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, all of which include elements of the sentimental and the Gothic.³⁸

In the first paragraph of the narrative, Crafts describes the heroine as “neither clever, nor learned, nor talented” with “none of that quickness and animation which are so admired,” but instead as having a “silent, unobtrusive way of observing things and events, and wishing to understand them better than I could” (5). Through this description of Hannah, Crafts adapts a passage from *Bleak House* in which Esther Summerson, the mysterious orphan, humbly admits that she is “not clever,” and also generally references Brontë's portrayal of Jane (Robbins 75). This “silent, unobtrusive way” leads the quiet, plain Hannah, who knows nothing of her family, to pursue her “instinctive desire for knowledge” in the context of her daily tasks as a house slave (6). Determining to learn to read despite the “absence of books and teachers and schools,” Hannah takes advantage of opportunities to “quietly steal away to ponder over the pages of some old book or newspaper that chance had thrown in [my] way” (6-7). She continues attempting to educate herself despite the knowledge that her master “never permitted his slaves to be taught”: “I was aware that this plan would meet with opposition, perhaps with punishment” (6). When a kindly white woman named Aunt Hetty—“the wife of a sand-

³⁸ Wheeler's catalog lists not only *Jane Eyre*, but also *Shirley* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

digger and very poor”—comes upon Hannah attempting to read a book in a field and offers to teach her, Hannah accepts and begins secret lessons in Aunt Hetty’s cottage (7). Again, Hannah uses her labor as a means of subterfuge: she “went out to gather blackberries and took advantage of the fine opportunity to visit [her] worthy instructress” (8). As her lessons continue, various errands “furnish the desired opportunity,” but these opportunities are often difficult to attain (11). Over the course of a year, Hannah becomes literate and “longs” to teach the young slave children whom she cares for what she has learned, only the fear of punishment keeps her from it (12). Crafts’s representation of Hannah’s education becomes an introduction to her character, showing how Hannah’s powers of observation allow her to recognize serendipitous moments for learning to read.

The threat of her master’s punishment looms, however, and his eventual discovery of Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah’s cottage introduces Gothic elements into the narrative. When Hannah’s overseer interrupts her reading lessons one evening, she cannot find the words to describe her shock: “My horror, and grief, and astonishment were indescribable. I felt Oh how much more than I can tell” (12). While Hannah escapes punishment, as her master is away from the plantation, the trauma she experiences when her teachers are “removed” is communicated through her Gothic imagination: “My fancy painted them as immured in a dungeon for the crime of teaching a slave to read” (13).

This notion of serendipitous contact with texts and the practice of literacy as a dangerous and transgressive act appears, in a slightly different context, in *The Mysteries of Udulpho*. While Emily, the heroine, is taught to read and to love books by her father during her idyllic early life, Emily’s early reading contains a serendipitous element that will later characterize her reading practices. In a remote “fishing-house” on her father’s

estate, Emily discovers a sonnet “written with a pencil on a part of the wainscot” and, while curious about the author, is “compelled to rest in uncertainty” about the poem’s origin (7). Like the texts that “chance” had “thrown” in Hannah’s way, the wainscot poem becomes exemplary of a transgressive means of reading that, for Emily, like Hannah, becomes a necessity. Emily’s father, on his deathbed, instructs Emily to locate a hidden packet of mysterious documents and to burn them “*without examining them*” (78). Of course, with “curiosity and terror,” Emily reads some of these forbidden documents and learns of an undisclosed circumstance that “inflamed her imagination” (103). Emily’s transgressive reading practices appear later, when she is imprisoned in her villainous “protector’s” castle: her reading of beloved books in secret leads her to explore a forbidden chamber, in which she transgressively “reads” a picture hung behind a veil (248). As the *Bondwoman’s Narrative* shifts from depictions of Hannah’s early reading to her life as a young house slave, Crafts recreates this Gothic scene of reading, connecting the act of reading texts to powers of observation and social empowerment.

Immediately after the narrative depicts the punishment of Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah, it shifts to portray preparations for the master’s new bride, and in doing so, Crafts makes use of Gothic tropes to describe her master, the plantation house, and her place within it, specifically alluding to and adapting passages from *Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Jane Eyre*, which, according to Catherine Keyser, contains “a similar blend of genres” and alludes to the same Radcliffe passage in which Emily discovers the veiled picture (88). Mirroring Jane’s role in household preparations for Mr. Rochester’s return to Thornfield with his rumored fiancé, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* interweaves Gothic tropes with “preparing the domestic theater for a romantic drama” (94). Instead of

assimilating Gothic tropes to American culture like other American authors of the antebellum period, Crafts employs a distinctly transatlantic Gothic to represent the oppressive system of slavery, despite the fact that these tropes appear anachronistic in an American narrative.³⁹ Crafts calls the plantation house the “ancient mansion of Lindendale” as though it were a European castle or British ancestral manor (13). This mansion had “descended” to her “aristocratic” master “through many generations,” as if his family were landed gentry despite America’s relative youth as a British colony and nation (13). The mansion’s drawing room, containing a “long succession of family portraits,” is located in the “southern turret” (15). This description of Lindendale resembles Montoni’s Udolpho, which Radcliffe describes as “vast, ancient, and dreary, with “mouldering walls of dark grey stone” and “clustering towers” with “overhanging turrets,” instead of the neoclassical design of most plantation houses (226-27). When Emily arrives at Udolpho, she is struck by its “gloomy and sublime ” aspect and soon hears, from a servant, Annette, that the castle is haunted. In fact, Annette is so intent upon telling ghost stories while leading Emily to her room that they become lost in the labyrinthine castle; while lost, Emily discovers the forbidden portrait gallery containing a portrait of Montoni as well as the picture behind the veil. At the center of a mysterious, “dreadful” tragedy that involves the former mistress of the castle and the villain Montoni, the picture is itself haunted, and when Emily later sneaks back into the gallery to remove the veil, she is filled with terror, but also knowledge of the castle’s secrets (249).

³⁹ Most criticism about American Gothic texts emphasizes how these texts differ from their British and European predecessors in an attempt to make a case for the authenticity of American fiction. According to Teresa Goddu, the term Gothic itself was erased from discussions of American texts for a time, not only because of its European origins but because of its association with “the hackneyed, the feminine, and the popular,” therefore lacking literary “respectability” (10-11; 5).

Significantly, just as “ancient mansions” in transatlantic novels are haunted by past crimes of the powerful against the weak, Crafts portrays the plantation house as haunted by the horrors of slavery. While cleaning in preparation for the arrival of the master’s new wife, Hannah has “an opportunity of seeing the house” (14). Like Jane Eyre, who, as a servant, assists with household preparations, the nature of slave labor allows Hannah access to “certain apartments [that] had been interdicted” to slaves previously, and now “no one could prevent [them] making use of their eyes” (14). Taking her “silent, unobtrusive way” into the previously forbidden parts of the mansion, Hannah narrates her sense of the mansion’s haunted nature:

There is something inexpressibly dreary and solemn in passing through the silent rooms of a large house, especially one whence many generations have passed to the grave. Involuntarily you find yourself thinking of them, and wondering how they looked in life, and how the rooms looked in their possession...Then all we have heard or fancied of spiritual existences occur to us. There is the echo of a stealthy tread behind us. There is a shadow flitting past through the gloom. There is a sound, but it does not seem of mortality. A supernatural thrill pervades your frame, and you feel the presence of mysterious beings. (15)

Crafts shifts into the second person during this passage, attempting to allow the reader to experience Hannah’s haunting sensations, just as British Gothic novels titillated readers by placing them concretely in the main character’s position. Keyser points out that Bronte does this within *Jane Eyre* as well in order to “directly engage readers with narratives of the past by placing them in a present-tense scene of suspended action” (92). Use of the

second person in combination with Gothic description places emphasis on the activity of the reader, a technique borrowed from the previous generation of Gothic novelists, particularly Radcliffe. This reveals that Crafts had knowledge of this tradition, and also perhaps that she wanted to stress reading as an active, not passive, activity.

This sympathy between text and reader heightens the sense of foreboding for Hannah's new mistress's fate, which is tied to the sins of the past that haunt Lindendale. Wandering into the portrait gallery that resembles Udolpho's, Hannah is haunted by the gaze of her master's ancestors, particularly Sir Clifford De Vincent, "a nobleman of power and influence in the old world" and "founder of [her] Master's paternal estate" (16). Looking at his portrait, along with her master's, their "haunting air" gives her a presentiment about the future. The portraits "seemed the first scene in a fearful tragedy; the foreboding of some great calamity; a curse of destiny that no circumstances could avert or soften" (17). With this "prophecy," Hannah "muses" that her master's portrait "seemed to change from its usually kind and placid expression to one of wrath and gloom...the lips turgid with malevolence" (17). Like Bronte, who portrays Jane looking insightfully upon Rochester's portrait, Crafts imbues the portrait of Sir Clifford with a "Gothic sense of awe and dread" to portray a "historical crime that still has not been expiated" (Keyser 96). Borrowing the hyperbolic language of transatlantic Gothic fiction, Crafts emphasizes that, just as the patriarchal British class system hid horrific realities, so too does its direct descendant, the patriarchal southern slave system. Yet evidence of these realities remains, spectral and haunting, behind the lavish veneer of ancestral portraits, corrupting the very patriarchy that perpetuates them.

Crafts continues to employ the Gothic to foreshadow her future mistress's fate when, on the night of her arrival, a supernatural wind "seemed to enter the drawing-room in the southern wing, rattling the shutters, and shrieking like a maniac," causing the linden tree planted outside to "sway and creak" (20). Hannah relates the horrific legend of the tree: the cruel Sir Clifford, who had planted the tree, chose it as "the scene where tortures and punishments were inflicted," "grow[ing] and flourish[ing]" because "its roots had been manured with human blood" (21). While slaves were "whipped" or "gibbeted" on its branches—most notoriously, a beloved slave named Rose and her pet dog—Sir Clifford would sadistically watch the proceedings from the drawing room window, drinking wine and "coolly discuss[ing] the politics of his day with some acquaintance" (21). Rose, before she died while gibbeted to the linden, declared that she would haunt the tree, which would become a curse to the master's house. Fittingly, when the new mistress arrives at Lindendale, the tree finally succumbs to harsh winds that "moaned fitfully" in its branches (22). The story of the tree parallels that of the new mistress, who, when she arrives that very evening, reflects the tree's haunted nature: "she was haunted by a shadow or a phantom apparent only to herself" (27). Later, readers learn that the mistress is the daughter of a slave, the product and soon-to-be victim of a corrupt system. Here, too, Crafts adapts *Jane Eyre*: the linden tree, for which Lindendale is named, is described like the chestnut tree in the garden at Thornfield which "writhed and groaned" in the wind before finally crashing down the night before Jane and Rochester's disastrous marriage.

These overtly Gothic elements and accompanying social critique immediately follow the story of Hannah's literary education, the tragic ending of which left Hannah

without words, and thus serve the purpose of giving Hannah her power of observation—and her voice—back. While she does not have the words to describe (or the ability to prevent) Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah's punishment, Hannah's presence in the portrait gallery and her ability to see the truth behind her master's mild façade give her a power linked to that of literacy, just as Emily's knowledge of Udolpho's terrible secret is connected to her reading and the haunted picture. As Keyser suggests, Jane Eyre and Hannah both "associate reading with looking," and with this looking comes a sense of power (94). The notion of the mansion's curse that comes upon Hannah in the drawing room does not drive her away from the portrait in fear, but instead allows her to realize a newfound sense of freedom:

I was not a slave with these pictured memorials of the past. They could not enforce drudgery, or condemn me on account of my color to a life of servitude. As their companion I could think and speculate. In their presence my mind seemed to run riotous and exult in its freedom as a rational being, and one destined for something higher and better than this world can afford. (17-18)

While Hannah's mistress may be a victim of the slave system, Hannah's ability to see its true nature—to read the portrait—makes her a subject instead of an object, even though she must keep her intelligence a secret. After this realization, Hannah is reprimanded by Mrs. Bry, the housekeeper, for her "prolonged absence"; when Hannah accounts for her presence in the room by stating that she was "looking at the pictures," Mrs. Bry calls her too "ignorant" to understand them (18). Instead of accepting this criticism, however, Hannah responds with notions of the self and the divine taken from Romantic philosophy,

which was influential to Gothic fiction: “Ignorance, forsooth. Can ignorance quench the immortal mind or prevent its feeling at times the indications of its heavenly origin. Can it destroy that deep abiding appreciation of the beautiful that seems inherent to the human soul?...I think not” (18).⁴⁰ Despite the loss of her teachers, Hannah regains her voice through the Gothic representation that her “quiet, unobtrusive” presence in the plantation house allows her. Crafts underscores the power of Hannah’s reading of her master’s house and portrait by employing allusions to her own reading of Gothic fiction in these passages.

Depictions of Hannah’s watchful and stealthy presence in the plantation house continue after the arrival of her new mistress, accompanied by the spectral, villainous lawyer and slave dealer, Trappe. One of the servers at supper their first night in the mansion, Hannah takes the opportunity to observe her mistress and the wedding party, saying, “I have said that I always had a quiet way of observing things, and this habit grew upon me, sharpened perhaps by the absence of all elemental knowledge. Instead of books I studied faces and characters” (28). While working, Hannah employs her powers of observation to notice that her mistress and Trappe, a “rusty seedy old-fashioned gentleman” with “great black eyes so keen and piercing that you shrank involuntarily from their gaze,” “watched and suspected” each other (28). In the months that follow, as Hannah attempts to ascertain the relationship between Trappe and her mistress, Hannah’s presence in the plantation house continues to be sharp and stealthy. While Trappe appears to follow her mistress, Hannah seems to follow Trappe, and her description of his presence in the house implicitly reveals her own: “He was only visible at times, and then

⁴⁰ This alludes to Radcliffe’s depiction of Emily’s Romantic sensibility when she travels through Europe with Montoni, observing sublime beauty and writing poetry about it.

you would see him...perhaps leaning against a pillar, or sitting silently in a corner. And sometimes you would encounter him in some lonesome passage” (32). Hannah also notices that Trappe “sometimes descended to the library, making himself at home among the books and papers” (35). Interestingly, Hannah herself has reason to go into the library, as her mistress, who treats her as a “companion” instead of a slave, “indulged [her] in reading whenever [she] desired” despite the master’s disapproval (37). In fact, it is while secretly reading that Hannah overhears the horrifying truth about her mistress and Trappe: as her father’s solicitor, he knows that her mother was a slave and wants to blackmail her into slavery. This conversation occurs in the parlor, where Hannah “had seated [herself] with a book behind the heavy damask curtains that shaded the window,” much like Jane Eyre, as a child, hides behind a curtain with her cousin’s book (37; Keyser 93). This transgressive reading, according to Keyser, comes not only from “their appropriation of forbidden books,” but also their “social invisibility,” a “marginalized vantage point” that allows Hannah the power of observation and “an avenue for agency” (93). While Trappe haunts Hannah’s mistress, Hannah haunts the master’s library, her ghostly presence as a reader giving her agency where her mistress has none.

Hannah’s unobtrusive reading under the nose of her disapproving master alludes to a scene in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in which a servant, Ludovico, reads a book from his master’s library. Late at night, in his “remote chamber,” Ludovico reads from a collection of “provençal tales” that another servant, Dorothee, had found “in an obscure corner of the Marquis’s library” and “who, having opened it and having perceived some of the marvels it related, had carefully preserved it for her own entertainment” (351). The book’s poor condition—it is “disfigured and mouldy”—had given her “some excuse for

detaining it from its proper station” (551). Dorothee then passes the book on to Ludovico, who reads a tale of revenge that Radcliffe includes in its entirety, with some bracketed asides in which Ludovico pauses to investigate a suspicious noise. Interestingly, Radcliffe asserts a narrative aside here, asking readers, “Is it not wonderful, that Dorothee and Ludovico should be fascinated by inventions, which had captivated the careless imagination of every rank in society, in a former age” (551-2). The democratic implications of this aside suggest that the scene of Ludovico reading becomes a means of sanctioning and even modeling transgressive reading.

As the narrative continues, Crafts references, again and again, her reading of transatlantic fiction as she tells the story of Hannah’s flight from Lindendale and the constant, haunting presence of Trappe as she and her mistress journey northward. Madness, confinement, violence, and death follow Hannah as she briefly experiences freedom, then is sold to another master, and finally seeks freedom again. In the process of depicting these events, Crafts continues to allude to Gothic fiction, particularly when Hannah flees the Wheeler plantation and must spend the night confined with a corpse—a formulaic Gothic scene.

Yet the influence of Dickens’s *Bleak House*, as Robbins has shown, is also foundational to the *Narrative*. Crafts’s wide-ranging “textual transfigurations” of the novel are both general and specific (74). The character of Trappe, a corrupt lawyer who capitalizes on a corrupt system, resembles Dickens’s Tulkinghorn and becomes the basis of Crafts’s adaptation of Dickens’s critique of the British legal system to the southern slave system.⁴¹ Crafts also nearly copies several passages from *Bleak House*, as Robbins

⁴¹ For a thorough discussion of how Crafts adapts *Bleak House* in the *Narrative*, see Hollis Robbins, “Blackening Bleak House.”

has shown, when describing herself humbly in the opening passages of the novel, Trappe's physical appearance, the oppressive living situations of slaves in North Carolina, and a walk through the rain on an errand for Mrs. Wheeler in Washington, D.C.⁴² According to Robbins, "the echoes are legion," and Crafts's allusions and revisions to Dickens's text reveal her to be a shrewd and critical reader (79).

While I will not rehash Robbins's very thorough investigation of the texts' similarities and their meanings here, I want to focus on the implications for slave reading that Crafts's assimilation of *Bleak House* in addition to *Jane Eyre*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and the conventions of Gothic fiction introduces. First, the "breadth and extent" of Crafts's allusions to these novels indicates that she was intimately familiar with these texts, had read them closely and critically, probably more than once, and had a copy that she could reference when writing her own narrative (77). Wheeler's 1850 library catalog lists two copies of *Jane Eyre*, a single volume published in 1847 and a three-volume collection titled *The Bronte Novels* published in 1850 (Keyser 88); it lists a single copy of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as well as a collection of Radcliffe's writings. Crafts could have referenced several editions of *Bleak House*, as it was published after Wheeler's library was cataloged in 1850. Published in 1852 and appearing in *Harper's*, which Wheeler listed in his 1850 catalog, as well as the *National Era* and *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, *Bleak House* was also reprinted in book form. Because Crafts references passages found throughout the novel, it is more likely that she read a bound reprint of the novel, perhaps added to the Wheeler library in 1852, or the installments that appeared in

⁴² Robbins asserts that the rain "is the work of Charles Dickens" as Crafts's description of it very closely resembles the opening paragraphs of *Bleak House* (74).

Frederick Douglass' Paper between 1852 and 1853.⁴³ This is because *Harper's*, received by Wheeler, and the *National Era* did not publish *Bleak House* in its entirety.

The latter option is intriguing and rather controversial given my claim that slaves had access to British and continental fiction via their master's library. Needless to say, most slaveholders would not subscribe to Douglass's paper, as they viewed it, and other abolitionist print, as inflammatory and dangerous. There is no evidence that Wheeler, a conservative regarding slavery, would have had even one copy of an abolitionist paper. Yet there is evidence that abolitionist print infiltrated the South through underground literacy networks. In addition to agents employed by *Freedom's Journal*, David Walker's *Appeal*, and other northern black papers, free blacks and runaway slaves became a means of informally and surreptitiously distributing northern print, both mainstream and abolitionist. Despite prohibitions and difficulties facing their own literacy, free blacks had greater mobility even in the South and were able to "create a climate where the importance and power of literacy [was] recognized" through their interactions with enslaved communities (Cornelius 78). In particular, they brought "calls for freedom and literacy" by northern black leaders into black southern communities via word of mouth and print (78, 82). Free blacks established schools throughout the South, even those for the enslaved (80). Some free blacks who were educated in the North returned to the South to teach in the antebellum era, such as Maria Ann Alexander and Mary Ann Shadd (79). Runaway slaves were even more mobile than many free blacks, their "boundary-crossing

⁴³ Concurrent with periodical serialization, Harper & Bros. issued *Bleak House* in nineteen parts (1852-53) and, soon after serialization was complete, in a two-volume edition with the original British illustrations by H.K. Browne. As was often the case with the reprint industry, cheaper one-volume editions soon followed, brought out by T.B. Peterson of Philadelphia, Getz & Buck of Philadelphia, Hurst & Co. of New York, and Houghton Mifflin of Boston, to name a few. Given the wide circulation of northern books in the South, it is likely that Wheeler would have purchased one of these editions in 1853, especially since his library contained three Dickens titles in 1850.

travels” traversing boundaries of North and South, black and white, free and enslaved (Loughran 375). According to Trish Loughran, Solomon Northrup’s travels as a runaway slave, recounted in his narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, show that his “access to the world of print” depended upon “where he happen[ed] to be at any given moment” (397). Even more so than for the enslaved, serendipity and subterfuge defined runaway slaves’ access to print, but their mobile status allowed them to share print with others, making them potential conduits for circulating northern abolitionist print in the South. In Peter Hinks’s account of how Walker circulated the *Appeal* in the South, he argues that runaway slaves, as well as free blacks, were a crucial means of carrying print from the coast to inland black communities. In North Carolina, Hinks suggests that a print network existed between Jacob Cowan, an enslaved tavern keeper in Wilmington, and black communities throughout the state; runaway slaves connected with Cowan delivered print from Cowan to other communities (137-8). The underground print culture that was the defining feature of black literacy in the antebellum era, as a result of the mobility of free blacks and runaway slaves, as well as the subterfuge of the enslaved, connected the lives and print culture of southern and northern blacks often portrayed as disparate by scholars.⁴⁴ Given these underground circulation networks, it is possible that the author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, as an enslaved woman, would have been able to read *Bleak House* as a bound reprint or serialized in Douglass’s paper.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ For instance, Elizabeth McHenry separates her thorough discussion of northern black literacy from slave literacy, despite the fact that Walker and Samuel Cornish, editors of early black newspapers she discusses at length, had multiple connections in southern states. For an in-depth discussion of Walker’s communication networks in the South, see Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (1997).

⁴⁵ Rebecca Soares argues that the author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, regardless of who she actually was, can be seen as an “ideal reader” of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* because she assimilated British fiction (and social issues) into a slave narrative, which is what Douglass wanted his readers to do (15). Crafts also, according to Soares, mimics the recontextualization of reprinting seen in antebellum newspapers in the

It is important, then, to see a reprinted book and serialization in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* as equally likely possibilities for an enslaved Hannah Crafts to access and secretly read. In either form, *Bleak House* can be considered one of many popular texts that circulated into the South via mainstream or underground distribution and became serendipitously available to slaves. Based on the holdings of plantation libraries compared with those of northern libraries and book stores, it is clear that a national reprint market was thriving in the antebellum era, distributing the same genres and titles in the North and the South. This national reprint market did not just reach white aristocratic and bourgeois readers, but free blacks and slaves as well through serendipitous and surreptitious contact. As Elizabeth McHenry has documented, the black literary societies that flourished in northern cities often sponsored reading rooms and libraries for their members' use that contained a variety of titles. Because black leaders believed that they were living in the "golden age of Literature" and that exposure to the "Literature of the day...brings in regular succession the condensed learning of past ages; and all the erudition of the present" (qtd. in McHenry 49), black libraries in northern cities grew in number. In 1837, James Forten, Jr., described the Library Company of Colored Persons in Philadelphia as "gaining strength every day" and having "a well supplied stock of books collected from the most useful and varied productions of the age"; the Company had over 600 volumes in 1838 and more than 150 members (McHenry 52). Similarly, the Phoenix Society in New York, begun in 1833, owned a

format of her narrative, which is an "exercise in copying and pasting, a practice of snipping and shifting material to give it a new shape" (13). While I am in agreement with Soares on the potential influence of Douglass's paper within the narrative, her conclusion that looking at Crafts as primarily a reader instead of a writer "opens up space for the text that avoids politically and ideologically charged racial and generic categories" is problematic (17). It appears that, for Soares, focusing on the text (and the evidence it suggests of the author's reading) and not the author's potential identity erases these issues, but the issue of race in particular cannot and should not be removed from any discussion of the text.

circulating library made up of a “good collection of valuable books” including “much that is rare and choice in English Literature [and] a considerable amount of History and Science” (qtd. in McHenry 54). The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia appointed an “agent” and a committee to “procure suitable books” for their library (61). The implications of Crafts’s reading, in context with northern black literacy and the existence of a national reprint industry, reveals that blacks, enslaved and free, participated in a national literary culture far more centrally than has been assumed, reading and assimilating the same texts as affluent whites.

The Bondwoman’s Narrative’s assimilation of British fiction found in Crafts’s master’s library, as well as on the shelves of New York libraries frequented by blacks and whites, raises the question of how a genre that has been considered a tool of hegemonic social discourse can also become a means of liberating self-representation. While Crafts employs the Gothic to undermine the system of slavery, white southern writers were inspired by their Gothic reading as well, employing the Gothic for the purpose of fear mongering and promoting draconian slave laws. While the Gothic served the purpose of critiquing the aristocracy in Britain, it could also promote bourgeois morality and gender restrictions through sentimental, marriage-plot endings. In America, narratives of the Haitian revolution and anti-Uncle Tom novels, for example, employed Gothic and sentimental tropes to provide a “discourse to symbolize and contain their terror” of blackness (Goddu 134). Calling the Gothic “the ghost that both helps to run the machine of national identity and disrupts it,” Goddu claims that this problem of co-opting the discourse of the Gothic “haunts” African American texts, as she reveals in her analysis of the Gothic in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (20). Similarly, books,

like slaves, are possessed by the master and therefore purchased, as Hannah states when she observes her master's opulent mansion, by slaves' "sweat and blood and unpaid labor" (14). Can the "liberating library" be separated from the "master's whip" by the potential empowerment of slave readership (Keyser 96)?

The Bondwoman's Narrative reveals how both transgression and compliance result from assimilating a dominant discourse to represent the experiences of the oppressed. Hannah's reading, as I have shown, establishes her as a powerful female figure who rises above victimhood to expose the corruption of the patriarchal slave system. Yet, as critics attest, Hannah's humble modesty and seemingly middle-class morality, seen most explicitly in the domestic scenario of the narrative's final pages, reflect the more restrictive aspects of sentimental fiction. Like *Jane Eyre*, *The Mysteries of Udulpho*, and *Bleak House*, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* ends with the heroine enjoying quiet domesticity: Hannah "found a life of freedom all [her] fancy had pictured it to be," living in a "neat little Cottage" after marrying and being reunited with her long-lost mother (244). The text's ending brings up the question asked so often by scholars of nineteenth-century African American writing: must a text be wholly transgressive in order to be liberatory? Or, asked another way, must black writers eschew the influence of white-authored texts in order to be considered subversive?

These questions themselves are too simplistic, particularly if we read antebellum black narratives as sophisticated interactions with the era's literary culture instead of through the lens of twenty-first century values. Choosing the first option, Claudia Tate argues that the formal conventions of sentimental fiction, including the marriage plot, imbued black women's narratives with authority, particularly since marriage, instead of

being the opposite of freedom, was desired as a civil liberty for nineteenth-century blacks (102-3). While some critics have viewed black women's use of sentimental tropes as restrictive, then, Tate argues that they are instead a way to "inscribe black women's moral indignation at the sexual and maternal abuses associated with slavery as the discursive equivalent to black men's moral outrage at the nation's refusal to respect their inalienable moral and civil rights as men" (107). By employing the sentimental ending in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Crafts—like Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson, who were also black antebellum readers—represents herself as a "civil entity" who has the freedom to marry instead of being "regulated by the caprice of slaveowners" (102).⁴⁶

Significantly, Crafts's sentimental ending represents Hannah's freedom by continuing to insist on the power of reading, connecting it with the freedom to marry. Not only does Hannah teach others to read, but she also encourages the active reading of her narrative. Dedicating very little space to actually describing the "undeviating happiness" that surrounds the free Hannah, Crafts ends the novel by asking the reader to take an active role in this "fancy" of freedom: "I will let the reader picture it all to his imagination and say farewell" (246). Crafts again employs the Gothic convention of an active reader, portraying the act of reading—even of reading the master's texts—as liberating.

Returning to de Certeau's theory of readers as poachers who "invent" themselves "on the property of others," his notion of assimilation provides a way to understand how Crafts's allusions to mainstream fiction can be seen as transgressive even while complying with some dominant cultural values (xii). De Certeau, building from Michel

⁴⁶ Jacobs and Wilson, like Crafts, wrote fictional autobiographies (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*, respectively) that include depictions of learning to read and allusions to transatlantic fiction. Since Jacobs was a freed slave and Wilson a free-born northern black woman, their use of these literary conventions further supports the notion of black participation in a national literary culture via reprints.

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, argues that readers are "caught in the nets of discipline"—i.e, they consume texts that the dominant order has produced— but resist this discipline at the same time (xv). Readers resist the dominance of the text by "poaching on it," or making the text "habitable" for them (xxi). This means that reading, instead of simply transmuting the meaning of the text passively, becomes a creative act through which assimilation occurs, not by mirroring the text, but by assimilating the text into readers' own lives (166). This process of assimilation is like "wandering through an imposed system," combining fragments of meaning into something new (169). Through this process, readers are influenced by the texts they read but are not dominated by them. Because, according to de Certeau, reading cannot be tightly supervised, the presence and circulation of dominant cultural expressions, such as mainstream fiction, "tells us nothing about what it is for users" (xiii). *The Bondwoman's Narrative* concretely illustrates this, providing a map of Crafts's process of assimilation as she "wandered" through her master's library, which means that the text can be seen as influenced but not dominated by the discourse of mainstream fiction. Crafts's assimilation becomes all the more transgressive considering that cultural surveillance, instead of urging her to read in a particular manner, demanded that she refrain from reading entirely. By providing a written record of her reading, Crafts commits a double transgression: she not only dares to become literate, but also dares to represent that literacy through the discourse forbidden her. Despite being considered her master's property, Crafts reclaims some of the fruits of her unpaid labor—the master's books—as her own.

Looking at *The Bondwoman's Narrative* in context with de Certeau's notion of creative assimilation and other testimonies of slave readers also suggests that the act of

reading is just as significant as the act of writing. While the western tradition has viewed writing as active and reading as passive, written documents of slave literacy suggest that reading is the first creative act, writing the second. Making the act of reading central to her narrative by depicting it implicitly and explicitly, Crafts's assimilation of transatlantic fiction asserts that speaking/writing is not the only mark of slave agency, and therefore not the only means of asserting freedom.⁴⁷ Making Hannah's labor and social invisibility crucial to her acts of literacy, Crafts implies that other slaves were haunting their masters' libraries as well, those who never inscribed evidence of their reading into a narrative of their own. That this was the case for at least some other slaves is evident in comparing the statements of FWP interviewees and other narratives with Crafts's text.

The journey of reprinted texts from northern publishers to privileged southern consumers, evident in the library catalogs of three North Carolina slave owners, reveals that the transatlantic reprint industry that dominated the northern print marketplace also controlled the southern print marketplace. Bringing reprinted British and continental fiction into the South and into the homes of slave owners, the transatlantic reprint industry also made these texts available to slaves, who, despite limitations on their literacy and their inability to purchase print, had potential access to their masters' libraries because of the nature of their labor. Through serendipity and subterfuge, at least some slaves were able to practice underground literacy by reading their masters' print, as *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and other slave testimonies suggest.

⁴⁷ This revises William Andrews's argument that writing is the ultimate act of freedom in African American autobiography of the nineteenth century. See his *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (1986).

While, in this chapter, I have shown that this particular scene of reading was possible, much more work remains in order for slaves' practice of underground literacy to fully materialize. *The Bondwoman's Narrative's* conversation with the fiction in Wheeler's library suggests alternate strategies for rendering slave literacy visible. The brief materialization of slaves haunting their masters' libraries in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and Aaron of Hayes's letters suggest that more evidence for slave readership exists, hidden in seemingly unimportant collections in out-of-the-way archives. Indeed, the very nature of underground reading makes it subversively depend upon the structures that order society, which, in the antebellum South, were white slave owners and their culture, which has been carefully preserved in libraries and historical societies throughout the South. Like Hannah haunts her master's library, so evidence of slave literacy haunts the archives of their masters, in which slaves are a ghostly yet persistent presence. In chapter 4, I turn to the scene of another kind of ghostly reader—the antebellum American working class. Unlike slave readers, who left few traces of their literacy, white antebellum working people left behind some evidence of their reading, but less of their class status or consciousness. The specter in the next scene of reading, then, is one of class consciousness that, I argue, becomes evident in white workers' strategies of underground reading also dependent upon the transatlantic reprint industry.

Chapter 4:
“Poets of the Loom, Spinners of Verse”: Reading British Poetry and Writing Class
Consciousness in New England Mill Towns

Is poverty so base a *crime*,
So horrid and so foul,
That we must bear their whips and scorns
And dare not even growl?
--Anon., “Reform” [printed in the *New England Artisan*]

Oh God! Is it their doom,
From year to year the same,
To toil and toil thus wearily,
To feed life’s fitful flame!
--Anon., “The Toilers” [printed in the *Voice of Industry*]

Must I blush, must I weep for the land of my birth,
Or bid hate or contempt stop the tears as they run;
Must I fly to some far distant corner of earth,
And there perish unknown and unscorned as thy son.
--Anon., “The Exile of Erin’s Return” [printed in the *Jesuit*, later the *Boston Pilot*]

Where are working-class readers and writers in antebellum American literary history? Surveying American literary scholarship, white people who performed manual labor in an era of increasing industrialization appear, if at all, largely as the products of bourgeois literary activity, not as active participants in literary culture. The small body of scholarship that has addressed working-class literary productions has focused mainly on a few exemplary writers, such as George Lippard and Ned Buntline; it has also relied upon problematic assumptions to describe a working-class readership—for example, the assumption that working people, if they read at all, mainly read sensational fiction and journalism brought out by the urban penny press and not the transatlantic reprints that defined the nation’s mainstream literary culture.¹ This invisibility of the white working

¹ See, for example, Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (1998), David S. Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988), and Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002).

class in accounts of antebellum literary history, as well as American history in general, prompted George P. Rawick, in the 1970s, to compare the absence of working-class perspectives in written history with that of African Americans: just as blacks have “appeared hardly at all,” he claimed that “no one has written a ‘making of the American working class’” (xiii).² While in the forty years since Rawick made this claim, historians like Sean Wilentz have written partial histories of the antebellum working class, much work remains to be done on the history of working-class literary culture and how workers’ consumption and production of print contributed to a shared understanding, among workers, of growing class divisions.

Complicating the task of writing a history of working-class literacy is the prolonged debate over whether a coherent antebellum American working class even existed—a debate that has rendered working-class readers and writers even more invisible by erasing their class status. In his seminal *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*, Wilentz asserts the existence of a coherent antebellum working class in the Northeast and confronts the decades of historiography that failed to account for the dynamic processes of class formation taking place in early national and antebellum America. Conservative historians of the mid-twentieth century, whom Wilentz calls Counter-Progressives, relied too heavily upon party politics to determine class cohesion, and therefore “discovered a past in which political conflict turned on deep ethnic, religious, and ‘status’ divisions but in which class and class consciousness were either non-existent or submerged by an American entrepreneurial consensus,” despite the “sheer mass of evidence” that “placed enormous strains” on these claims (8). Resurrecting this mass of evidence, Wilentz rejects a

² Rawick refers here to E.P. Thompson’s seminal *Making of the English Working Class*.

“woefully stylized impression of class consciousness” which suggests that in order for it to exist, there must be “an all-embracing (usually revolutionary) critique of capitalist wage relations, held by the mass of proletarians and expressed in all consequential matters of public and private concern, above all in politics” (15). Instead, revealing his Gramscian influence, Wilentz understands class consciousness as a “pattern of human relationships over time” that often arises in “the merest transactions of everyday life,” and recognizes “the possible coexistence of several tendencies and outlooks, sometimes in a single movement or in the minds of individual participants” (17).³ Understanding class formation and consciousness in this more fluid way, Wilentz ultimately argues that, during the antebellum era, “a new order of human relations did emerge...defined chiefly...by the subordination of wage labor to capital”; working people “came...to understand this was happening, and they began to think and act, in E.P. Thompson’s phrase, in new ‘class ways’” (18).

Yet Wilentz’s persuasive argument has been challenged by a new wave of conservative scholars, including reading historian David Stewart, who accuses Wilentz of writing “advocacy scholarship” and making workers “stigmatized objects” of his “political preoccupations” (20-21). In his study of young workingmen’s reading habits, Stewart denies the existence of antebellum class consciousness, returning to earlier historians’ conception of class as a “hard category” (23). After perusing the unpublished journals of several young northeastern workingmen, many of which depict their reading habits at length, Stewart argues that reading “confuse[d] class identification” in a time when social boundaries remained “permeable and identities fluid,” because it

³ Gramsci revised Marx’s rigid notions of class, viewing it as a more dynamic phenomenon. See the introduction for a discussion of Gramsci and hegemony.

“internalized scales of value” that encouraged upward mobility (19). Yet, when Stewart actually presents his evidence, particularly from the journal of a young New England journeyman named Edward Carpenter, it places “enormous stains” on his claim, for in the same journal entries in which Carpenter describes his reading, which he sometimes did at work, he also employs the language of class difference to bemoan the plight of workers like himself at the hands of the “aristocracy” and “big bugs” and expresses sympathy with workers’ movements, even if he does not provide record of taking part in one himself (qtd. in Stewart 17). While Carpenter does not express radical opinions or “riot in the streets,” as a “stylized” definition of working-class consciousness would demand, his literary activity provides evidence for Wilentz’s definition of class consciousness in the antebellum era: Carpenter recognizes “a new order of human relations...defined chiefly...by the subordination of wage labor to capital,” and his literary activity is connected to this recognition (18). Therefore, Stewart’s claim that Carpenter “stands as an embarrassment to any neat [class] binary we might invoke” reads more like self-criticism, since Stewart reinstates a class binary that Wilentz dismantles (23). As a whole, Stewart’s confusing rejection of working-class consciousness in the antebellum northeast, despite established evidence to the contrary, works toward keeping working-class literary habits invisible instead of bringing them to light—not because Stewart denies the existence of working readers, but because he denies the existence of self-consciously working-class readers. This denial of working-class cohesion and consciousness sheds light on the continued relevance of Rawick’s comparison of white working-class and black social histories: while African American readers are nearly invisible because of a lack of substantial evidence for their literary activity, making their presence in the

archives ghostly, white working-class readers are nearly invisible because of historians' protracted debates about class consciousness, making class itself a historical specter.

The invisibility of class itself becomes an important factor when considering how the most visibly literate of antebellum workers, the New England "mill girls," have been construed as working-class anomalies and therefore have not spearheaded discussions of working-class literacy. The literacy of the mill girls, much discussed in the American and British press of the 1840s, has been taken for granted by labor historians since that time. Employed by the Boston Associates, who controlled the paternalistic Waltham system—Francis Cabot Lowell's attempt at conscientious capitalism that provided funds and resources for the operatives' literacy and continued education—the mill girls are considered anomalies in American labor history because of their supposed ethnic homogeneity and seemingly indeterminate class status.⁴ Many emigrated from Yankee farms and villages, had fathers and grandfathers of English and Scottish descent who fought in the American Revolution, and inherited a Protestant ethic that taught hard labor was ennobling. Fixating on their educations in rural "common" schools, penchant for church-going, and view of factory work as temporary, scholars continue to view the mill girls as essentially middle-class industrial tourists who had little contact with other industrial workers and thus should be treated as a separate class, particularly in comparison to the Irish immigrant workers who flooded New England textile factories in the 1850s and '60s.

⁴ Francis Cabot Lowell, like his predecessor Samuel Slater, traveled to England, toured textile mills in Lancashire and Yorkshire, and then replicated British technology in America. Unlike Slater, who mechanized spinning but not weaving and hired entire families, especially children, as his workforce, Lowell mechanized weaving, housed all steps in the textile production process in one building, and hired women as his primary workforce in Waltham, MA (Dublin 16-18). His firm, the Boston Associates, later invested in Lowell, MA and named the town in his honor.

The claim that mill girls were middle-class is problematic, however, because it relies primarily on the representation of mill girls' literacy by the antebellum mainstream press which was largely in the service of capitalists, whose reputations and profits benefited from claiming that mill girls' literacy separated them from an oppressed transatlantic working class. Mill investors, along with their supporters in the church and the Whig press, and by some of the mill girls themselves—particularly the now-vilified Harriet Farley, vocal co-editor of the corporate-sponsored *Lowell Offering*—encouraged the portrayal of mill girls as genteel readers.⁵ The *Offering*, in particular, has become a puzzle for scholars of the New England working class, because it contained writings by mill girls, many of whom were associated with Farley's "improvement circle," while also appearing pro-corporate. The *Offering's* purpose, according to Phillip Foner, was "to dispel the notion that factory work was degrading and that the mill operatives were exploited" (*Factory Girls* 26).⁶ Distributed throughout the country and reprinted in England by Harriet Martineau, the *Offering* and similar titles such as the *Operatives' Magazine* and the *Olive Leaf* became a means of distinguishing the New England mill girls from their supposedly degraded counterparts in Britain and Europe, as well as from other workers in America—child textile workers in Fall River, Irish manual laborers, and domestic servants, to name a few.⁷ While Americans assumed that British capitalists sought to limit their workers' literacy in order to keep them in submission, mill-girl literacy as portrayed in the *Offering* fed a discourse that benefited the Boston Associates,

⁵ I use the word "genteel" here to infer the appearance of middle-class refinement without the support of a middle-class wage.

⁶ Foner probably develops this view of the *Offering* from Elisha Bartlett, a doctor in Lowell who, in 1841, published *Corporations and Operatives*, in which he argued that the main purpose of the *Offering* was to benefit the corporations, not the operatives.

⁷ Bartlett accuses the corporations of circulating the "literary productions" of a "few girls" as a "sample of their intellectual cultivation and literary accomplishments, as a class!" (Foner, *Factory Girls* 26).

portraying them as paternal benefactors even while they exploited workers for profit, lowering wages as early as the 1830s.⁸

Yet did this benevolent paternalism, as the Boston Associates portrayed it, really distinguish mill girls from other industrial workers, particularly as readers? As Howard M. Gitelman has argued, the novelty and extent of the Boston Associates' paternalism is highly questionable, despite Nathan Appleton and Henry Miles' fervent articulation of it, as well as the *Offering's* failure to challenge these assertions.⁹ In fact, the similarities between American and British corporate systems in the textile industry calls into question claims that British workers suffered more and thus created a more coherent working class. "Compelled by necessity" to hire a cheap, mobile workforce, the Associates' seemingly expansive liberality toward the women in their employ "was only relatively so": pay was only marginally better than in other textile mills and working conditions "marked little or no advance over prevailing standards" (6). The Boston Associates competed directly with British textile corporations, meaning that despite their anti-British rhetoric, the wages paid to American textile operatives had to be as low as those paid to their British counterparts (8). Because there was no existing standard for female wages in the antebellum period besides that of domestic work and "household manufactures," the Boston Associates could seem like a "high-wage firm" while "paying absolutely low wages" (8). Interestingly, British textile corporations in Lancashire were also hiring more women in the 1830s, particularly as powerloom weavers, in order to lower wages; many

⁸ The first known wage protest among mill girls in Lowell took place in February of 1834; another took place in the fall of 1836 (Zondervan 201, 205). In Waltham, the first of Francis Cabbott Lowell's paternalist mill towns, a wage-related protest had taken place in May, 1821 (162).

⁹ Appleton was one of the Associates; Miles was a Unitarian minister and corporate "apologist" who articulated paternalism in this way: "the sagacity of self-interest, as well as more disinterested considerations, has led to the adoption of moral police" (qtd. Dublin 78).

of these women, like New England mill girls, were between the ages of 15 and 25, emigrated from rural areas, and worked “episodic[ally]” (Morgan 28).¹⁰ Perhaps because of their turn to a female workforce, British firms also attempted to appear paternalistic and argued that they were more humane than their European counterparts. This meant that British firms also encouraged literacy: the Ashworths, for example, opened reading rooms for their employees that impressed visitors, even while they paid low wages and suppressed unionization, just like the Boston Associates (Lewis 290-92). Therefore, claims that literacy set mill girls apart from other American and particularly British textile workers were largely untrue. Additionally, in New England, not all sources of textile workers’ literacy were corporate-sponsored: Gitelman points out that the cultural opportunities attributed solely to the Associates, such as “Sunday schools and reading rooms and elementary schools,” were paid for primarily by taxes, meaning that they were available to other workers, as well (9).¹¹ As we will see, sources of literacy and education that were completely independent of the Associates’ support became competing means of practicing literacy. The Boston Associates’ claims of benevolent paternalism that focused on their workers’ literacy, resounding throughout the antebellum mainstream press and into contemporary historiography, appear to be mere claims, calling into question the mainstream representation of textile workers and their literacy as genteel instead of consciously working class. The mill girls’ practice of literacy, then, does not set them apart from other workers, but potentially unites them.

¹⁰ Ironically, British legislation limited women’s and children’s working hours to ten during the 1840s, while New England firms successfully fought similar legislation (Moran 37).

¹¹ In fact, the Associates were actually opposed to the public school system in Lowell; the minister Thomas Edson, an education reformer, had to continually battle Kirk Boott, the first corporate agent in Lowell, for their funding. Meanwhile, corporate apologists employed free education as an anti-Ten Hour legislation tool in the 1840s. The 1845 report, which rejected the petition for Ten Hour Legislation, contrasted American textile laborers with British, saying, “Here labor is on an equity with capital, and indeed controls it, and so it ever will be while free education and free constitutions exist” (qtd. in Dublin 115).

Scholars' focus on corporate-sponsored representations of mill-girl literacy—like the *Offering* and its contributors—as exemplars of mill girls' literacy and lack of class consciousness is misleading in two related ways. First, this focus causes scholars to overlook the thriving and diverse New England working-class print culture of the antebellum era that provides a counterpoint to the supposedly genteel literacy of the *Offering*. A continuation of the presses of the early national period, working-class papers of local and regional extraction abounded in New England. Some originated in artisanal trades, like the *New England Artisan*; others were organs of the growing number of mechanics' associations, like the *Voice of Industry*; and others were affiliated with ethnic groups or religious sects, like the *Boston Pilot*. Like the *Offering*, these papers included literary content: poems and stories were often printed on the front page. Much of this literary content was of transatlantic origin and reprinted from other working-class or mainstream papers, but, particularly in the 1840s, original poems submitted by readers began to appear in greater numbers. The poems excerpted in the chapter epigraph, all anonymous submissions, are original compositions appearing in these papers that represent the hardships of working-class life through verse. The poems' negative tone reveals that these labor papers were unafraid to criticize the status quo: they placed pro-labor poetry beside overtly political columns that criticized the rise of industrialization, the growing power of banks and corporations, ethnic discrimination, and the lack of personal and political freedom that resulted from long working hours and wage cuts. The literary culture that appears in these papers, as this chapter will show, has the same roots as the *Offering*—in the reading of reprinted British texts, particularly poetry, available in public, private, and circulating libraries of New England mill towns. Yet the influence of

British poets, especially the radical Romantics, allows these papers to counter-represent the literacy of New England operatives as anti-corporate and self-consciously working class.

Second, scholars' focus on the *Offering* as the benchmark of mill girls' literacy is misleading because it portrays mill girls as a separate workforce with little contact with other workers who were supposedly not as literate. Yet as David A. Zonderman has argued, antebellum factory operatives were "a surprisingly diverse population" that included men and women, children and adults, native-born and immigrant workers (6). In support of this diversity, the *New England Artisan*, the *Voice of Industry*, and the *Boston Pilot* reveal that while working-class readers were a varied group, they were, in fact, a class, and they often saw themselves as such. Each of the papers sought the readership and contributions of a wide range of workers, including but not limited to mill girls. In 1832, for example, the *New England Artisan* was subtitled "Laboring Man's Repository," but in August 1833 was expanded to "Farmer's, Mechanic's, and Labouring-Man's Repository," showing that the paper felt the need to be more explicitly inclusive of various workers. The content, significantly, remained rather militantly anti-corporate, and the paper continued to include columns about mill girls despite their absence from the subtitle. The *Artisan*, then, was not simply for artisans, who have been considered "working-class elite," but for working people across New England who were finding more in common since the rise of the corporate-controlled textile industry (Wilentz 10). Similarly, the *Voice of Industry* was begun by the Fitchburg, Massachusetts Workingmen's Association but later moved to Lowell and was published by mechanics and mill girls working together. The interests of male mechanics and female operatives

were mutually represented during the paper's nearly three-year run, and the paper served as a means of communication for labor organizations across New England. Most interestingly, the *Boston Pilot*, which began as the *Jesuit*, became more militantly working class almost by default: as a Catholic paper based in Boston, its primary readers were Irish, most of whom were confined to the lowest working-class jobs by prejudice. Distributed throughout New England and into the South, the *Pilot* became a means of educating and organizing an Irish working class that included day laborers and mill girls, as well as domestic workers and ascendant merchants and managers.

These papers, all published between 1830 and 1860 in Massachusetts, question the assertion of a homogenous, quasi-middle-class, pro-capitalist readership in antebellum mill towns, and instead depict a different scene of antebellum working-class reading. Taken together, these papers suggest that textile workers in New England—female operatives as well as male mechanics and laborers—were conscious of their working-class status, a status that becomes evident through their reading of British poetry and their writing of poetry and prose for labor papers. These papers' reprinting of English, Scottish, and sometimes Irish poets, as well as the connection to and even influence of these poets upon prose reporting, question the assumption that reading and writing in New England mill towns was necessarily Nativist and genteel, leading to class confusion and the alienation of Irish workers from literacy. Instead, the papers illustrate that workers employed poetry to assert their "own conception of the world," to borrow Gramsci's notion of building class consciousness through cultural engagement and critique (*Selections* 323).¹² In doing so, American textile workers more closely resemble

¹² There were certainly many textile operatives who did not agree with the class-consciousness being disseminated in these papers. Zonderman articulates two clear "sides" to how workers viewed their

British textile workers, who employed reprinted and original poetry in Chartist papers to raise class consciousness.¹³

In this chapter, I argue that a coherent, literate working class did exist in antebellum New England, and that their practice of underground literacy—similar to that of African Americans and the British working classes—becomes both a marker of their class status and a means of recognizing their class consciousness. The underground literacy of white New England workers, like that of African Americans and British workers, was defined by social surveillance, the conditions of labor, and the transatlantic reprint industry, which made more texts available to those without privilege and allowed for the assimilation of mainstream texts into different contexts. Focusing on the *Artisan*, the *Voice of Industry*, and the *Pilot*, I investigate how these specific scenes of reading, in conversation with the misleading narrative of genteel readership, expand the boundaries of New England working-class literacy and class consciousness, challenging the notion that neither existed in antebellum America. First, to interrogate the “genteel” narrative and demonstrate how its fissures support a wider, class-conscious readership, I begin by looking at how two of the supposedly “genteel” mill girl poets, Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson, ambivalently represent themselves as working-class readers in their autobiographical depictions of Lowell in the 1840s. Because they use many of the same underground reading strategies that British working-class autobiographers of the same era

relationship to capital and social hierarchy. One side argued “in support of the factories and their opportunities for new work and advancement” (6). The other side “warned that the factory was a growing threat to workers’ livelihoods and lives, and that any potential opportunities paled in comparison with the specter of oppressive discipline and a monotonous division of labor” (6). Yet, from his survey of multiple forms of writing by textile workers, Zonderman ultimately concludes that these “sides” were “never fixed or precisely predictable,” but were instead “fluid and constantly shifting,” a “broad continuum of ideas between and even within individual workers,” which supports Wilentz’s definition of class consciousness, as well as his disavowal of the notion that “a single entity came into being...never to change or be changed, ever bound by a unity of sentiment..., autonomous and eternally resentful of other classes” (18).

¹³ See chapter 2.

employed to represent their literacy, I argue that these texts fail to support the genteel narrative of literacy in New England mill towns and instead reflect the working-class press's Romantic-influenced scenes of reading. With the genteel narrative of literacy thus troubled, I investigate how each of the *Artisan*, *Voice of Industry*, and *Pilot* co-opt the representation of literacy from capital and encourage class consciousness through the reading and writing of poetry.

I. "A Class Feeling": Lucy Larcom, Harriet Hanson Robinson, and Histories of Reading in Lowell

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the tension between capital and labor had reached a level of previously unparalleled national visibility, two former mill girls published their personal narratives about the antebellum textile trade. Both Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson had achieved some visibility in the postbellum period—Larcom as a poet and children's magazine editor, Robinson as a women's suffrage activist. Their early situations bore other similarities: they were the children of widows who had come to Lowell to run boardinghouses in the 1830s after being impoverished by their husbands' deaths; they valued reading and writing and, as a result, participated in "improvement circles" and saw their writing printed in the *Lowell Offering* and other local papers; and both also sought to escape becoming permanent mill workers through their acts of reading and writing. Robinson married an anti-slavery newspaper editor and became an activist for women's suffrage; Larcom left the mills to travel West with her older sister, taught school in order to finance finishing her education, and finally returned to Massachusetts, where she taught at Wheaton Seminary and became a professional writer and newspaper editor. While their social circles expanded to include bourgeois radicals of their time, neither Larcom nor Robinson ever stopped laboring for their living.

Interestingly, their texts about Lowell in an earlier and, in their opinion, fairer era of labor were part of the labor that sustained them at the end of their lives.¹⁴

As contributors to the *Offering* in the early 1840s, Larcom and Robinson had already entered a tense print discourse on the politicized representation of mill workers that had involved factory owners and agents, the clergy, reformers, and the mill workers themselves. With the publication of Larcom's *A New England Girlhood* by Houghton Mifflin in 1889 and Robinson's *Loom and Spindle, or, Life Among the Early Mill Girls. With a Sketch of "The Lowell Offering" and Some of Its Contributors* by Crowell & Co. in 1898, they entered a new but equally tense discourse about corporate abuses and the plight of factory workers who had begun to organize in greater numbers and protest militantly. That Larcom and Robinson did so by focusing on their young lives as textile operatives in Lowell and by suggesting—Robinson more directly than Larcom—that Lowell was a “lost garden of Eden” in comparison to the factories of the late nineteenth century threatens to plunge both writers into a complicated morass of representation, a situation that both narratives reveal through their many contradictions (Robinson 1). In depicting themselves as child textile workers, both walk a tightrope between maintaining personal dignity and the desire to represent the hardships of factory life, particularly to a new generation of young factory workers looking for an escape from factory work.

The result, for both narratives, is a central contradiction between the general and the specific that continues to mislead scholars of antebellum textile workers. Larcom and Robinson's general statements about factory work, echoing those of early factory

¹⁴ Claudia L. Bushman, Robinson's autobiographer, writes that the Robinsons “lived respectably, though on the edge of destitution” for most of their lives (xii). According to Shirley Marchalonis, Larcom was dependent upon her writing for income at the end of her life and complained that while *A New England Girlhood* received critical praise, it did not at first sell as well as she had hoped (218; 252). For discussion of Larcom's relationships with her publishers, see chapter 12 of *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom*.

apologists, have led more recent scholars to use both narratives as support for the “genteel” narrative of mill girls in Lowell. These scholars either ignore the contradicting specifics of the narratives, or, worse, internalize the same contradictions in their scholarship, which results in a schizophrenic history of the class status of not only textile operatives in Lowell, but of the working class in New England.¹⁵ Taking Larcom and Robinson at face value, and viewing their texts as objective histories, a misleadingly complacent and subservient population of mill workers emerges, in which most mill girls traveled to Lowell to buy new clothes and quickly moved on to become middle-class housewives, and thus felt little or no connection with other workers. Considering the contradictions within Larcom and Robinson’s texts, however, and regarding them as constructed narratives to be interrogated, I argue that the texts provide a highly ambivalent yet inescapable representation of mill girls as part of the emerging industrial working class. More importantly, the narratives depict knowledge of this class status—and at the same time, an evasion of that knowledge—through their representation of literary activity.

Representation of class consciousness occurs most clearly in these narratives when Larcom and Robinson represent their struggle to refine their literacy skills and to acquire the materials and the time to do so with little money and while working in the

¹⁵ Thomas Dublin internalizes the contradiction between paternalist assertions and material realities most noticeably in *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*. In fact, he uses Robinson’s *Loom and Spindle*, along with a handful of letters that, in my opinion, he misinterprets, as evidence for his claim that most mill girls in Lowell did not work in the mills out of economic necessity and eventually escaped the mills and the working class (25; 35). Dublin, like Robinson, articulates the many hardships of mill work on one hand and calls mill work “leisurely” on the other (109). While Dublin argues that most mill girls left the mills to marry, his statistics show that almost 65% of these were married to farmers, skilled tradesmen, and machinists, while 20% had husbands who were also employed in the mills (51). Zonderman is the only mill girl historian I have encountered who viewed Larcom and Robinson’s autobiographies as “glowing ahistorical visions of happy childhoods spent in the factories” with omissions and tensions more interesting than the surface narrative (9).

mill over twelve hours per day, six days per week. While both view literacy as a means of upward mobility, the way in which they depict the struggle to practice literacy bears striking similarity to the way in which British working-class autobiographers of the same era—many of whom were factory workers as well as poets and agitators—do so. In fact, British working-class autobiographers describe similar material conditions for reading some of the same texts (Rose, *Intellectual Life* 3). Because of the dominance of reprinting in America, Larcom and Robinson, like their British counterparts, move from religious texts found in their homes, such as the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*, toward the “great” British poets, such as Milton and Shakespeare, and finally toward the Romantics, such as Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley.

The similarity of these specific conditions and texts is significant because it illustrates that both mill girls and British workers were practicing underground literacy, which I have defined in chapter 1 as strategies of reading that respond to adverse social and material conditions that should limit literacy. This is evident in three related ways. First, the similarity of depictions of learning to read and the limited availability of books reveals that while New England mill girls were depicted as middle-class in mainstream print, the material conditions of their lives—what Wilentz calls the “transactions of everyday life”—identified them as working class (17). Second, Larcom and Robinson, like British working-class autobiographers, read “omnivorously,” or whatever texts they could locate within their community—a community of working-class readers that valued print as a means of power. This is important because shared texts, read in shared conditions, create a common discourse through which, as I will show in my discussion of working-class newspapers, class consciousness emerges. Third, these shared

circumstances of reading and writing between Larcom, Robinson, and British working-class autobiographers call into question the pro-capitalist discourse of contrasting New England textile workers favorably with British textile workers. Despite paternalist claims by the Boston Associates of fostering literacy through libraries and lyceums, New England mill workers in the Waltham system practiced literacy *despite* the circumstances of their labor and living spaces. Interrogating Larcom and Robinson's depictions of reading and writing in Lowell, I argue that their narratives reveal that Yankee mill girls practiced underground literacy as part of an emerging New England working class that included the mechanics, artisans, Irish laborers, and farmers who lived and participated in their communities, and, through transatlantic trade that transported cotton and print, the more highly class-conscious British working classes. Larcom and Robinson, like their British counterparts, describe strategies of underground reading, and by doing so, reveal their working-class status.

Early in their narratives, Larcom and Robinson portray their economic and material circumstances in general and specific terms, contrasting their hardships to those of impoverished British children. Despite the reduced circumstances they describe, both Larcom and Robinson lessen their impact—and maintain a sense of personal pride and patriotism—by comparing them to those of British textile workers, which they have encountered through reading.

In the first chapter of *A New England Girlhood*, Larcom describes her ancestors as prototypical New England Yankees, “unlettered” and “indifferent and ignorant as to questions of pedigree... [They] accepted with sturdy dignity an inheritance of hard work and the privileges of poverty” (19). While these forefathers hailed from the rigid class

structure of England, Larcom suggests, they embraced the republican ideal of a classless society and saw poverty as a privilege because it caused “unseen and eternal realities” to be “more clearly beheld” (19). Yet when describing her family’s class status during her childhood, she is evasive, claiming a lack of awareness of economic disparity since, in her hometown of Beverly, “everybody about us worked,” and her father, once a ship captain, intended all of his children to learn a trade, including Larcom’s older sisters, who learned tailoring as teenagers (121). While scholars have assumed that Larcom’s father’s former position as captain meant that the family was in good economic standing, she mentions in passing that since her father had a “limited income” and a “large family of daughters,” he therefore had considered moving the family to Lowell so that his daughters could work in the mills (145). This “limited income” does not enter into Larcom’s idyllic portrayal of her early life in Beverly, however, where she read English poetry and hymns about impoverished children and expressed puzzlement about what a “beggar” or a “pampered menial” might be (119). “Nothing that had ever come under our observation corresponded to the word,” Larcom writes. “I settled upon the conclusion that ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ were book words only, describing something far off, and having nothing to do with our every-day experience” (119).

Larcom maintains this transatlantic contrast as the narrative continues and her family’s economic situation degrades. Even after her father’s death, and her realization that “poverty was a possible visitation to our own household” (136), and even after the “continually increasing leak in the family coffers” forced the family to move to Lowell and Larcom herself to enter the mills as a bobbin girl at age 11, Larcom maintains that the first beggars she saw were “of Hibernian extraction” and expressed thanks for

handouts “with a shower of benedictions that lost itself upon us in the flood of its own incomprehensible brogue” (165). By suggesting that the destitute in Lowell were Irish-born, Larcom tries to separate her own family’s dire circumstances from theirs, as well as to maintain that “Old World traditions about factory life” did not hold true in Lowell, that instead “independent and intelligent workers invariably give their own character to their occupation”—despite the fact that Irish settlers in Lowell were also largely employees of the mills and some Irish girls and women, in the early 1840s, were beginning to work as operatives alongside Larcom (46).¹⁶ Later, Larcom again underscores the difference between “New” and “Old World” factory labor when she attempts to describe mill girls’ class status, claiming that while they were not “ladies,” they were not typical factory “girls”: “They themselves belonged to the New World, not to the Old; and they were making their own traditions, to hand down to their Republican descendants, --one of which was and is that honest work has no need to assert itself or to humble itself in a nation like ours, but simply to take its place as one of the foundation-stones of the Republic” (201). Attempting to soften her own economic hardships by claiming that American textile workers, like foundation stones, are crucial to the nation despite their low status, Larcom employs poor British children and factory workers as foils in order to balance the realities of her family’s financial situation with a sense of family pride and patriotism. As we will soon see, however, this contrast breaks down when Larcom depicts her autodidacticism and the strategies of underground reading that support her learning.

Similarly, Robinson, in reflecting on the backgrounds of Yankee mill girls in general and on her specific experience, contrasts Lowell workers with their British

¹⁶ I discuss this in the final section of the chapter.

counterparts, attempting to mask her own low class status. Describing the circumstances of pre-industrial New England families early in her narrative, she states that “money was scarce” but that “the people had plenty to eat, for the land, though sterile, was well cultivated; but if children wanted books, or a better education than the village school could give them, the farmer seldom had the means to gratify their wishes” (2). This is essentially a description of subsistence farming that, while not necessarily a life of poverty, was hardly privileged, genteel, or even comfortable, as Thomas Dublin claims. Of her own family’s circumstances, which Robinson calls “typical,” she states, “Under the shadow of a great sorrow...my mother was left to struggle alone; and, although she tried hard to earn bread enough to fill our hungry mouths, she could not do it, even with the help of kind friends” (16). Robinson’s father had been a Boston carpenter—a skilled working-class occupation—who had descended from an old Yankee family, and there seems to have been no safety net for his family after his death, for they “soon became poorer than ever” (17). During that winter, Robinson’s mother and siblings slept in the same bed for warmth, and Harriet was sent to a “charity school to learn to sew” in order to provide the family with extra income (17). Still, Robinson maintains, she was unaware of the family’s poverty until the charity school teacher called her “poor” (17).

The family’s circumstances appear to have improved only slightly upon their move to a boardinghouse in Lowell, where Harriet was expected to help her mother do housework for forty male boarders before and after school; at the age of ten, her mother “allowed” her to go to work at the Tremont Corporation, where she became a doffer, and was still expected to help with housework after returning home from the mill (19). While Robinson admits that the long hours of labor were difficult for the young operatives, and

despite the “pathetic stories” told by “little fatherless mill-children” during free moments, she maintains, “in every other respect, it was a pleasant life” (20). She then contrasts her own circumstances with those of an English mill girl depicted in a song she and the other doffers used to sing, “The Factory Girl’s Last Day,” in which a child literally works herself to death. In introduction to the song, which she quotes at length, Robinson writes, “I cannot tell how it happened that some of us knew about the English factory children, who, it was said, were treated so badly, and were even whipped by their cruel overseers” (21). She then concludes, “In contrast with this sad picture, we thought of ourselves as well off, in our cosey corner of the mill, enjoying ourselves in our own way, with our good mothers and our warm suppers awaiting us when the going-out bell should ring” (22). As with Larcom, a fictional representation of poor British children reprinted from British texts allows Robinson to maintain the fiction that she did not live in poverty or hardship as a child operative, despite the details she provides that suggest otherwise.

Robinson’s narrative, however, is even more fraught with contradiction than Larcom’s, as the specific examples she offers of factory work often directly conflict with her generalizations about the superiority of New England textile factories to British. Even more so than Larcom, Robinson recites platitudes about mill girls “[teaching] the people of that time that [factory] labor is not degrading,” describing their boarding houses to be “refined as their own homes,” which earlier Robinson had described as primitive, and their health “good” due to the “regularity and simplicity of their lives” (49). Interestingly, she describes at length the four-tiered class hierarchy of Lowell, with factory agents as the “aristocrats,” overseers as “a sort of gentry,” the operatives, of which she says very little in terms of class, and finally, the “lords of spade and the shovel,” or Irish laborers,

living in “shanties” on the Acre (9). Remarkably, immediately after this, she then denies the economic reality of this system, claiming, “there could not have been much aristocracy of wealth; but...there was a class feeling, which divided the people, though not their interests. For, as has been said, the corporation guarded well the interests of its employed” (11).

This baffling articulation of a class structure on one hand and denial of it on the other—with the operatives as an absence on its second-lowest tier—is contradicted not only by the conditions of Robinson’s own family, summarized above, but also by her evident dislike of Kirk Boott, the agent installed in Lowell by the Boston Associates and soon-to-be owner of the Boott Corporation. While Robinson speaks glowingly of the Boston Associates as “men who were wise enough to consider physical, moral, and mental needs of those who were the source of their wealth” (11), she calls Boott a “great potentate” who “exercised almost absolute power over the mill-people” (5). She attributes this to his English education, through which he had “imbibed the autocratic ideas of the mill-owners of the mother country,” and describes at length how he cheated the farmers of North Chelmsford out of the land that would become Lowell (5-6). “A song was made about it,” she writes, “and sung by everybody,” within which he is called “a young man from the old countree” (6). Robinson then recalls that on one Fourth of July, Boott raised the British flag over the American outside of his “fine mansion” (6). Through an act of remarkable cognitive dissonance, Robinson disassociates Boott and his British “tyranny” over the operatives from the paternal Boston Associates, even though he clearly acts in their interests. While it should follow that Boott’s British influence reveals how the Waltham System actually resembles the British system despite the claims of the Boston

Associates, Robinson scapegoats Boott as an anomaly which allows her to deny the similarities between British and American capitalism that she has, in fact, already described. Yet, as the narrative continues, Robinson, like Larcom, cannot deny how these similarities impact the shape of her literary education.

While Larcom and Robinson attempt to distance their childhood poverty from that of British children, Larcom in particular portrays encountering books as a child similarly to accounts of early literacy in British autobiographies. David Vincent, in his seminal *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography*, asserts that “few homes of the laboring poor” in Britain in the 1830s were “devoid of literature,” and that the meager holdings in these “cottage libraries” nonetheless became “an essential foundation for the pursuit of knowledge” depicted in working-class autobiographies (109, 111). The Bible, prayer books, a “haphazard collection of religious commentaries,” and works of religious imagination such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* or *Paradise Lost* were most often found in working-class homes and served as “useful primers” for children learning to read (110).

Larcom’s account of her family’s small collection of books and her early encounters with them illustrate that these same texts forged her own desire for knowledge. Taught basic reading in a dame school and instructed in writing by her sister Emmeline, Larcom describes discovering books within the family home. Larcom calls her family’s books “dear, dull, good old volumes that all my life I had tried to take a sincere Sabbath-day interest in,” and lists Bible commentaries, religious reflections, and protestant periodicals (148). While these had never been choice texts for Larcom, she asserts that they played a constant role in her reading life since she was a young child.

Larcom also recalls, “The book I loved first and best, and lived upon in my childhood, was *Pilgrim’s Progress*”; unlike the dry religious texts, she “cared for it...as a story,” even as she knew “that it meant something more” (101). Larcom most likely borrowed *Pilgrim’s Progress* from the “Sabbath-School library,” which she observes was filled with “English reprints” (99).¹⁷

Vincent argues that these early encounters with books owned by the working-class family resulted in a “certain reverence for the printed word” that translated, in autobiographies, as “quite simply, a love of books” (111). British working-class autobiographer John Plummer, for example, wrote of his childhood, “Books! books! books! was my continual cry” (qtd. in Vincent 185). This enthusiasm is evident throughout Larcom’s narrative, but particularly in the first few chapters, in which the story of her childhood is essentially told through which books she encountered and what she thought of them. Part of this narrative is a humorous account of Larcom beginning her own library with damaged, abandoned books that she reclaimed simply because she desired books of her own. One day she finds, “among some rubbish,” *The Life of John Calvin*, that, while missing a cover, “did not look so very old, nor as if it had been much read; neither did it look very inviting to me as I turned its leaves”; yet, she decides to keep it, as “a book was a book to me, and this would do as well as any to begin my library with” (129). Larcom finds no more books for some time until she “[picked] up one other book of about his size, and in the same one-covered condition”—Byron’s *Vision of Judgment*, bound with poems by Southey (130). While Calvin was not

¹⁷ In fact, an 1846 Harper & Bros. reprint of the text, printed with “A Life of John Bunyan, by Robert Southey” and illustrated with 50 woodcuts, a gift from “George,” appears in Larcom’s personal library, now housed at Wheaton College. *Pilgrim’s Progress* was apparently so meaningful to Larcom that she spoke of it to friends, and one of them gave her a copy of her own as a gift.

“inviting,” Larcom describes being drawn to Byron’s verse, which “jingled, and apparently told a story about something” (130). Larcom mocks her own inability to grasp Byron’s “irreverence,” and jokes that “John Calvin and Lord Byron were rather a peculiar combination, as the foundation of an infant’s library,” yet she considered these volumes “brother-books, like each other in their refusal to wear limp covers” (131). The randomness of Larcom’s encounters with books within her home, her love of books for their own sake, and the impact of this early reading on her future literacy, parallels Vincent’s analysis of British working-class autobiographers, as well as Rose’s claim that British working-class readers “rescu[ed] [books] from trash heaps” (“Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader” 42). Most importantly, it reveals that while Larcom is reluctant to define her family’s class status, their patterns of book ownership and reading define it for her.

In their portrayal of reading in Lowell, Larcom and Robinson use the term “omnivorous” to describe not only their personal reading habits, but a distinctly working-class means of locating and “devouring” print (Larcom 105, Robinson 56). According to Kelly Mays, British working-class autobiographers depicted their attempt to “make the most of their limited reading matter” as, at times, a “lack of judgment [or] discernment...displayed in the process” (“Speck” 115). In their desire to read despite limitations to their doing so, workers depict relying on their communities and upon serendipity to provide print, which meant, according to autobiographer Rob Breton, that workers “read Shakespeare and romances, Byron and murder stories, apparently without creating categories of high and low” (112). Robinson, who moved to Lowell at a younger age than Larcom, provides a snapshot of how child operatives, despite only

receiving three months of formal schooling per year, found the time and resources to read. Stating that she and other doffers “read all the books we could borrow” (26), she describes mill girls not only borrowing books from circulating libraries and sharing them, and subscribing to newspapers and magazines together (55), but also less obvious means of sharing books: she returned books to the circulating library for her mother’s boarders and was allowed to read them in payment, and she read the books that her brother, clerk to the agent of the Tremont Corporation, was allowed to borrow from the agent’s desk overnight (26-28). In describing the texts she read in this way, Robinson expresses ambivalence about novels, such as those by Richardson, Fielding, Scott, as well as *Charlotte Temple*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and the *Castle of Otranto*: “I am not now conscious that the reading of the doubtful ones did me any lasting harm. But I should add that I do not advise such indiscriminate reading among young people, and there is no need of it, since now there are so many good books, easy of access, which have not the faults of those I was obliged to read” (27).¹⁸ Yet later, even after stating that “novels were not very popular among us,” Robinson admits that novels were “read with delight, and secretly lent from one young girl to another” (57).¹⁹ Robinson’s account, and her ambivalence about the course of her early reading, shows that like British working-class autobiographers, New England mill workers were “never in a position to exert complete control over [their] supply of reading matter” (Vincent 118). This can be seen most

¹⁸ The books that Robinson lists here, and that Larcom lists in her narrative, can be found in the catalogs of Lowell circulating libraries from the 1830s and 1840s that I discuss later in the chapter.

¹⁹ Similarly, Larcom recalls encountering British novels that her sisters borrowed without their father’s knowledge from the local circulating library: she mentions books such as the *Vicar of Wakefield*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Arabian Nights*, and “some off volumes of Sir Walter Scott’s novels” that she “appropriated to myself a great deal” (105). *Scottish Chiefs*, she claims, was the first novel she read (105). “My appetite for reading was omnivorous, and I devoured a great many romances. My sisters took them from the circulating library...it was not often that one escaped me, wherever it was hidden” (105-6).

clearly in how autobiographer Charles Shaw describes the random collection of books he found in a small Sunday school library, which included *Robinson Crusoe*, Rollin's *Ancient History*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Pollock's *Course of Time*: "These books may look now a strange assortment for such a boy of fourteen or fifteen to read, but they were no assortment at all. They just happened to fall into my hands" (qtd. in Vincent 120). Both American and British autobiographers provide evidence for the British Select Committee on Public Libraries' statement that the "lower classes" were "supplied with literature...by accident altogether" (qtd. in Vincent 116).

Workers' conversion from "omnivorous" into serious readers often coincides with an awareness of themselves as working class, as Mays suggests (119). Despite their early lack of discretion, both Larcom and Robinson experience a "secular conversion" experience much like that described by British workers in which their reading transitions from "omnivorous" to intentional. This intention to embark on a serious course of study occurs in opposition to domestic and working conditions that treated workers like machines and were therefore not conducive to study. Like British workers, Larcom and Robinson lacked consistent formal education because of the demands of factory labor; though they managed to attend some informal evening classes, ultimately they had to decide to commit to a course of study on their own or with the help of a few fellow workers. Both depict their commitment to seriously studying poetry despite material limitations of work, and in doing so, represent themselves as working-class readers.

As they turn toward the serious study of literature, Larcom's and Robinson's narratives both represent the practice of reading while working, and reading in community with other working readers. At age 15, when she left high school to support

her mother, Robinson read poetry over breakfast before dawn; she also read and wrote poetry of her own while working by keeping a book in her lap (28). This resonates with British autobiographer Thomas Cooper's description of consuming books and food at the same time: "A book or a periodical in my hand while I breakfasted, gave me another half-hour's reading, I had another half-hour, and sometimes an hour's reading or study of language, at...the time of dinner—usually eating my food with a spoon after I had cut it in pieces, and having my eyes on a book all the time" (qtd. in Vincent 124). Robinson and Larcom both describe the practice of pasting poems to factory windows and machines so that operatives could read while working without violating the rule that forbade books on the mill floor. Larcom recalls her creation of a "small library of poetry" on the window near her loom that included poems by Felicia Hemans and others clipped from weekly papers (176). Robinson adds that it was "very common for weavers and spinners to do this," and that doffers "were fond of reading these clippings, and no doubt they were an incentive to our thoughts as well as to those of the older girls" (28).²⁰ Similarly, British weaver J.A. Leatherland wrote that he preferred velvet weaving to ribbon weaving because it was a "more highly suitable occupation for the exercise of thought and meditation," as it is more mechanical and requires less intervention (125). Some silk weavers, however, could "place books before them to read whilst at work," despite the noise and attention required (qtd. in Vincent 125).

²⁰ Books, including Bibles, were forbidden in the mills, but scraps of print were either permitted or overlooked. Rules for conduct in and out of the mills were strict and specific, and operatives were constantly under surveillance, on the factory floor and in the boardinghouse. However, the enforcement of rules seems to have been inconsistent. While some operatives were reportedly fired for reading in the mill, others did so regularly. For mill rules and a variety of reasons for dismissals, see Zondervan chapter 5, "Rules, Schools, and Prisons."

Robinson connects workers' reading of reprinted poetry in the mill to self-directed courses of reading and writing that took place after work, either alone or through "Improvement Circles" (28-29). While these circles, of which there were several in Lowell and other mill towns, are still cited as evidence that the mill girls were "genteel," it is crucial to note that British textile workers also depict improvement circles in their autobiographies. Vincent cites the example of Ben Brierley, a Lancashire weaver, who formed a "mutual improvement society" in the town of Failsworth in the early 1840s—the same time that improvement societies reached the height of their popularity in Lowell (111). In his autobiography, Brierley describes their meetings in a Sunday-school room and their plan to form a library (111-12).²¹ Similarly, weaver J.A. Leatherland founded an improvement society, published poetry in local papers, and became secretary of the local Chartist association (177). While not sanctioned by corporate interest, British textile workers' improvement societies served the same basic purpose of those in New England: to allow working-class autodidacts to pool their material and mental resources. Reading in the factory and in community with other workers were practices that textile workers on both sides of the Atlantic employed to overcome the limits on self-improvement imposed by the demands of factory work.

Operatives also employed their few leisure hours in overcrowded domestic spaces with little privacy toward improving their literacy. While Robinson tends to portray Lowell boardinghouses as genteel parlors in which "books were exchanged, letters from home were read, and 'pieces' intended for the Improvement Circle were presented with friendly criticism," less glowing descriptions of boardinghouse conditions reveal that

²¹ For further discussion of British workers' improvement societies and informal associations, see Vincent chapter 6, "The Pursuit of Books."

these activities must have occurred under unfavorable circumstances. Twenty to forty operatives lived in each house, with six or more sleeping in each bedroom, two to a bed. Ironically, in a letter to Robinson, fellow mill girl H. E. Beck described a scene contradictory to the one in Robinson's narrative: "[I am] seated in the short attic of a Lowell boarding house with a half dozen of girls seated around me talking and reading and myself in the midst, trying to write to you, with the thoughts of so many different persons flying around me that I can hardly tell which are my own."²² Similarly, a letter from another mill girl named Harriet to a friend written from a boardinghouse bedroom in 1850 describes the discomforts of practicing literacy there:

It is now dark. I have just got out to my boarding house in my room, seated flat on the floor, my trunk serves for a desk, and a tidy needle a foot long with the head pooled [sic] off and my pen tied on with a piece of cotton thread serves for a pen stalk. And my fingers are cold enough, so I guess as I labor under so many disadvantages you will excuse delay and bad writing.²³

While Larcom does not quite acknowledge these difficulties, she does depict "[sitting] up nights" after a long day of factory work to read "an electrifying new poem, --'Festus'" with a roommate: "Sarah and I looked up into each other's face from the page as the lamplight grew dim, and said, quoting from the poem, 'Who can mistake great thoughts?'" (243). Larcom hints that they read the poem late at night because "some of our friends thought it not quite safe reading" (244). This domestic reading, and its

²² This letter is part of the Harriet Hanson Robinson Collection in the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

²³ Another operative, Sarah Page, voices unhappiness with her boardinghouse and references writing in her attic room: "am now in my little chamber surrounded [sic] by these walls only but my mind is far away from here" (undated letter). Both letters are archived at the American Textile History Museum in Lowell, MA.

accompanying inconveniences and secrecy, resemble the conditions that female British workers depict in their autobiographies, as they attempted to negotiate work, domestic duty, and surveillance of their reading by parents and siblings (Mays 355). Like the autobiographer John Harris, who “wrote in a dear old chimney by winter firelight, while my buxom brothers were shouting around me,” Lowell operatives must have “longed for some obscure corner” in which to read and write in comfort and quiet (qtd. Vincent 121).

Larcom represents her recognition of class status and simultaneous defiance of the dehumanizing aspects of factory work through her attempts to integrate learning and labor, nature and industry in the narrative. This occurs at the point in the narrative when she embarks on a distinct course of study in defiance of the demands of work after she begins to work full-time as a weaver in order to support her family. Describing the “severe disappointment” she feels after having to give up high school, she realized that she “did need and want just that very opportunity to study” (155). When she returns to the mill, she does so “without enthusiasm,” feeling as if she had “looked through an open door that I was not willing to see shut upon me” (156). While working as a doffer, she had labored under the impression that factory work was temporary; at this later point in the narrative, she implicitly acknowledges that this may no longer be the case, that she may be part of a permanent factory population. Yet Larcom portrays herself responding with defiance and determining to learn regardless of her circumstances: “I could be a student, wherever I was and whatever else I had to be or do, and I would!” (161). Like Cooper, who wrote of his goal to “commit the entire ‘Paradise Lost’ and seven of the best plays of Shakespeare to memory” and “be well acquainted also with the current literature of the day,” among other things, by the age of twenty-four, Larcom vows to pursue

literature systematically (qtd. in Vincent 120). Just as the pursuit of knowledge “offered the [British] working class reader a limited but very real area of independence,” so Larcom describes freeing her mind from the unavoidable confines of the mill (Vincent 166). In doing so, Larcom acknowledges the degrading effects of work that she had previously evaded through republican rhetoric as well as her own working-class identity.

At this point, Larcom’s depiction of her desire to read, like her reading and writing itself, becomes distinctly Romantic in influence, revealing the importance of British reprints to her course of self-study. When she transitions from a doffer to a spinner, Larcom secures spinning frames “that stood directly in front of the river-windows,” and “kept myself occupied with the river, my work, and my thoughts. And the river and my thoughts flowed on together, the happiest of companions. Like a loitering pilgrim, it sparkled up to me in recognition as it glided along, and bore away my little frets and fatigues on its bosom” (175). Describing the confinement in the weaving room during warm summer days, she recalls the awareness that “there was some danger of our becoming drudges”; in response to these feelings, “I would lean far out of the window, and try not to hear the unceasing clash of sound inside. Looking away to the hills, my whole stifled being would cry out ‘Oh, that I had wings!’” (182). Expressing her love of solitude and dislike of the mill’s mechanized atmosphere, she recalls, “I discovered, too, that I could so accustom myself to the noise that it became like a silence to me. And I defied the machinery to make me its slave. Its incessant discords could not drown the music of my thoughts if I would let them fly high enough” (183).²⁴ Romantic discourse

²⁴ This passage sounds very similar to one by Samuel Bamford, a Manchester warehouseman, who wrote that “while bending beneath a load of piece goods... would I be unconsciously wandering in my imagination in the free forest glades with Robin Hood, or ‘Over some wide water’d shore’ with Milton”

influences Larcom's contrast of the factory with nature and the human imagination, which resists mechanization.

Meanwhile, Larcom embarks on a study of English literature at night—aided by the city library—that feeds these “fancies” (237).²⁵ Beginning with Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare and skimming over “Dryden and the eighteenth century,” which “generally did not interest me,” Larcom arrives at the Romantics, whom she first read before coming to Lowell (237-9). In an anthology given to her by her sister called “The Young Man’s Book of Poetry,” Larcom read Wordsworth, which “lifted me into ecstasy,” as well as Young, Cowper, and Burns (239). Additionally, her “work-folk acquaintances” let her borrow *Blackwood’s Magazine*, the *Westminster Review*, and *Edinburgh Review* (240). Larcom declares, “By the time I had come down to Wordsworth and Coleridge in my readings of English poetry, I was enjoying it all so much that I could not any longer call it study” (240). She becomes so committed to reading and writing that she takes a job in the counting room with slightly less pay because reading was allowed there, and because her primary activity was counting bales of cloth and writing recording the numbers in a ledger (229). Larcom recalls writing scraps of poetry in the account books and borrowing a volume of John Greenleaf Whittier’s poems from one of the male machine operators in the counting room, who was “quite a poet” in his own right (230).

Larcom represents her study of the Romantic poets as directly influential to her own poetry, which is significant for a few reasons. On one hand, poetry—particularly

(qtd. Vincent 166). On the other hand, H. E. Beck wrote to Robinson, “In vain I try to soar in fancy and imagination above the dull reality around me but beyond the roof of the factory I cannot rise.”

²⁵ The Lowell City Library and City School Library contained large selections of British poetry from the medieval period until the present. The 1860 catalogs list individual volumes, anthologies, and biographies of British poets from Chaucer and Spenser to Byron and Tennyson. Both catalogs are held at the American Antiquarian Society.

British poetry—was still considered an elevated form of *belles lettres*, showing that Larcom’s precociousness as a self-taught reader. On the other hand, the Romantic poets, particularly Byron’s “Satanic” verse, were considered scandalous, dangerous, and immoral in the nineteenth century because their poetry questioned the status quo (Felluga 71); by studying them, and by writing her own Romantic poetry, Larcom pushed the boundaries of respectability governing young women’s reading—boundaries that were particularly important for a mill girl who was not a “lady.” Larcom brings both of these implications into her narrative when she gives readers an overview of her poetry, which is often melancholy in tone. While working as a spinner by windows overlooking the Merrimack River, she writes a poem entitled “The River” that becomes her first publication in *The Offering*, in which she likens herself to the river. “My Childhood,” which was printed in the *Operatives’ Magazine*, reflects on a lost happy childhood defined by communion with nature: “Nature’s music in my ears was ringing all day long!” (213). The melancholy tone deepens in the other poems Larcom quotes from her early days as a factory poet such as “The Complaint of a Nobody” and “The Early Doomed,” both of which appeared in the *Offering*. Interestingly, Larcom feels the need to dismiss this melancholy as illegitimate, and does so by attributing it to Romantic influence. One particularly dark poem, “The Murderer’s Request,” she claims was directly influenced by Byron, yet she distances herself from his infamous “melancholia” with humor.²⁶ Placing her lines beside his, she explains, “I was only trying to see how

²⁶ According to Dino Franco Felluga, Byron’s version of Romantic “genius and melancholia...were often associated with Milton’s heroic Satan” in *Paradise Lost*, which meant that Byron was seen as “awe-inspiring but also dangerous and, ultimately, immoral” (81). With Byron’s notoriety well established by the 1840s on both sides of the Atlantic, Larcom’s depiction of reading and being influenced by Byron during this period cannot be read incidentally.

near I could approach to his exquisite metre. I do not think I felt at all murderous in writing it” (215).²⁷

Within the narrative, Larcom’s defensiveness about her gloomy poems that personify nature strikes a contradictory note. Larcom’s detailed description of these poems, appearing in the same chapter as her defiance of machinery—an implicit defiance of the factory system—and her insistence on pursuing an education, suggest the radical influence of Romanticism on the young Larcom.²⁸ Instead of appearing genteel, Larcom’s Romantic influence mirrors that of British working-class autobiographers, who, by reading the Romantics and writing imitative poetry, employed nature as a means of opposing industrialization and its impact on workers (Vincent 186). Vincent states that all of the autobiographies he surveyed mention reading poetry, a “surprising number tried their hand at composition,” and that “those who took a serious interest in this form of self-expression...owed much to the Romantic movement” (185).²⁹ Despite her attempts to make light of a more radical Romantic influence, Larcom’s textual paralleling of her growing consciousness of her identity as an operative and her writing of Romantic poetry undercuts her claims that the factory was a “pleasant place to stay” and aligns her reading habits with a sense of class consciousness. Transatlantic Romanticism, then, becomes a discourse through which Larcom embeds her awareness of class and the oppressive

²⁷ Larcom’s darker poems can be contrasted with the *Offering* submissions that Zonderman calls “dreamscapes of almost mythical natural beauty” (29). Yet it bears noting that the *Offering* did print some darker pieces that can be read as resistance to its corporate sponsorship.

²⁸ Defining the revolutionary impact of Byron’s poetry, Felluga notes that it “defamiliariz[es] and antagoniz[es]” the present, prompting the reader to imagine “a place where or a time when social antagonisms may be reconciled and national crises overcome” (74, 76). Perhaps because of this, Byron’s poetry inspired radical movements from the Luddites in his own time, to the Russian Decembrist uprising, to the Chartists of Larcom’s era, to the Italian Risorgimento (74). Interestingly, Larcom’s poetry functions similarly to Byron’s, defamiliarizing the present and imagining future reconciliation.

²⁹ Vincent notes that Ben Brierley, the Lancashire operative who helped form an improvement society, mocked himself in his autobiography for imitating the Romantics by reciting *Childe Harold* and wearing the “Byron tie” while “try[ing] to look melancholy” (qtd. 182).

conditions of factory work while maintaining the moderate tone of her narrative—another way that Larcom’s reading strategies become a signifier of her class status.

In their representation of reading and writing despite the limitations of factory work, Larcom and Robinson invalidate their generalizations about the gentility of Lowell mill girls: in their narratives, the hardships of mill work are inseparable from the operatives’ practice of literacy. These hardships—the limited availability of texts, an inconsistent formal education, the problem of finding time and space to learn—exist because of the nature of work in a textile mill, and therefore can also be seen, as Vincent and Mays suggest, in British textile workers depictions of literacy. The ways in which Larcom and Robinson surmount these difficulties—their “omnivorous” reading, learning in community, and viewing self-education as empowerment—are shared by British workers despite the rhetoric of “Old and New World” factory systems. These transatlantic conditions of factory labor and literacy reveal that despite the genteel pretensions of some New England operatives, there was little difference between their material circumstances and those of their British counterparts. Acknowledging these shared circumstances, many New England workers were far less reluctant to represent themselves as an oppressed working class than Larcom and Robinson.

The striking similarities between the literary habits of American and British textile workers as narrated by the workers themselves suggest that despite the corporate paternalism to which both Larcom and Robinson give superficial credence in their narratives, New England textile workers practiced literacy as a class and were conscious of it. For Larcom and Robinson, class consciousness emerges in spite of their narratives, through ambivalence and contradiction. This “class feeling” in Larcom and Robinson’s

texts transforms into a specifically working class identity in the *New England Artisan* and the *Voice of Industry*, in which class consciousness is overtly linked to the reading of British poetry. While Larcom and Robinson, at least in their generalizations, “borrow” their self-conception as workers “from another group”—the Boston Associates and their apologists—the newspapers overtly oppose the representations of workers by capitalists and instead clearly circulate a “common conception of reality” (Gramsci, *Selections* 327).

II. “Awake, Arise! Fellow Mortals”: *The New England Artisan*, *The Voice of Industry*, and the Influence of Romanticism on Class Consciousness

In a column entitled “Take Courage!” appearing in the May 22, 1846 issue of the *Voice of Industry*, correspondent and labor leader Huldah Stone argues that “complete union among all producing classes” can be accomplished by the “industrious becoming well informed.” Instead of considering money to be the highest good, an idea that breeds only ignorance, Stone entreats readers, “Awake, arise! fellow mortals, from this degrading state, and resolve from this day forth, to be no longer slaves to ignorance...Let the ‘spirit of Divinity which stirs within,’ shine forth, and life intellectual quicken anew!”³⁰ Stone’s connection of the drive to form labor associations, which had strengthened in the mid-1840s, to self-improvement, to the democratic and decidedly Romantic notion that every individual contains the divine, is not an isolated incident. Throughout the *Voice of Industry*’s nearly three-year run as a prominent labor paper across New England, the paper consistently expressed its mission to unite and elevate working people through Romantic discourse, illustrated in the direct influence of Romantic poetry and philosophy upon poetry and prose printed in the paper. Yet the

³⁰ The quoted text could be derived from Emerson, but it also bears similarity to quotes by several British Romantic authors. In any case, it broadly communicates the Romantic idea of individual divinity.

paper, co-edited and published by male mechanics and female operatives from across New England, was not the first regional labor weekly to connect the reading of Romantic poetry to working-class politics. In the early 1830s, the *New England Artisan*, published in Boston by the New England Association of Mechanics and Working Men, consistently reprinted British Romantic poetry and published original poems influenced by the Romantics alongside columns advocating for the organization and education of working people. Looking at these representative papers, a pattern emerges: the Romantic notion of democratic, divine nature as a reformer of degraded human social systems, along with its focus on the interior life of the individual, become a means for simultaneously circulating class consciousness and self-improvement among New England workers.³¹

This use of Romanticism as a means of supporting class consciousness and the growth of literacy by regional, self-consciously working-class papers reveals that British Romantic discourse had not only become influential to prominent, bourgeois writers of the New England Renaissance, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Greenleaf Whittier, but to mechanics, operatives, and other laborers who were beginning to view themselves as a cohesive, disadvantaged class by the 1830s. The re-appropriation of Romantic discourse as a radical, non-hierarchical discourse, mirroring that of British workers in the Chartist press, was made possible by the widespread reprinting of British Romantic poets in America, and, more importantly, by the inclusion of these poets in mechanics', public, and cheap circulating libraries across antebellum New England.³² Borrowing, quite literally, from these sources, the *Artisan* and the *Voice*

³¹ I focus on these papers because of their regional (instead of local) status, but the influence of Romanticism can be seen in several other working-class papers of the era, as well.

³² Romantic poetry and prose appears often in British working-class papers, including the *Northern Star*, the Chartist newspaper I discuss in chapter 2. Byron, Shelley, and Leigh Hunt were reprinted often in the

of *Industry* employ Romanticism not to escape or ignore class disparity, as the *Offering* has been accused of doing, but to provide workers with a common language for exposing and fighting against corporate abuses through print.³³ The discourse of Romanticism allowed these papers, which were attempting to unite a diverse population of New England workers, to define and defend the working class while also motivating workers to expand their literacy.

The *New England Artisan* and the *Voice of Industry* began as local papers, brought out by specific organizations, but even early issues reveal that both papers had a larger vision for working-class cohesion that comes to fruition in later issues. Moving beyond provincial notions of working-class identity, the papers sought to unite male farmers and artisanal workers—the old guard of the New England working class—with a new industrial workforce composed of men and women from agricultural backgrounds now working for textile corporations as mechanics, operatives, and laborers. In order to promote unity among an increasingly diverse working class, the papers attempted to avoid the major pitfalls of disunity—party politics and Nativism—while encouraging the growth of literacy that led to a strengthened, politically powerful working class.³⁴ While,

Northern Star in the 1840s. Romantic writers were generally influential not just to the Chartist movement in England, but to revolutionary groups across Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because they challenged the political status quo through democratic rhetoric (Felluga 73).

³³ This brings up the question of whether the *Offering*, despite the pro-capitalist sympathies of its editor, Harriet Farley, might have been doing the same thing in a more subdued manner. While the *Offering* contained no overtly political commentary—it was a literary magazine, not a newspaper—the influence of the Romantics can certainly be seen in many of the contributions. In *Loom and Spindle*, Robinson lists several Romantic poets as directly influential to the writers of the *Offering*, including Byron, whose “sardonic vein is copied by one or two of the most independent minds among them” (70). Zondervan argues that Farley’s own writing about nature is fraught with disturbing, sometimes violent symbolism (68–9). While time nor space permits it here, it would be worth investigating how the influence of Romanticism becomes a subversive presence in the *Offering*.

³⁴ Particularly in the late 1840s and 1850s, several working-class papers became explicitly Nativist in response to the influx of Famine victims from Ireland and the decline of conditions in the textile mills. Some even became organs for the “Native American Party,” an offshoot of the Democratic Party, also called the “Know-Nothings,” which incited violence against Irish populations across New England. One

as we will see, the papers were not able to escape these pitfalls entirely, Romantic discourse became a vehicle for communicating class consciousness that workers of Democratic or Whig, Yankee or immigrant backgrounds could apply to themselves. Meanwhile, situating class consciousness within this literary discourse also became a means of encouraging workers to improve their literacy, and toward that end, both papers include reprinted Romantic poetry alongside columns that reflect Romantic influence. Ultimately, the presence of transatlantic Romanticism within antebellum American working-class newspapers illustrates my claim that a diverse yet cohesive New England working class—not just mill girls—engaged in literary culture, reading some of the same reprinted texts as African Americans and British workers, and employing the discourse of these texts to represent themselves as thinking, literate citizens, not simply cogs in a transatlantic industrial machine.

***The New England Artisan and [Farmers', Mechanics', and] Labouring-Man's
Repository (Boston, 1832-1834)***

Owned by the New England Association of Mechanics and Working Men, and quoting the Declaration of Independence in its masthead—“We hold this truth to be self-evident—that all men are created equal”—the *Artisan* self-consciously declared its working-class consciousness through its original subtitle, “Laboring Man’s Repository,” to be expanded in 1833 to the more inclusive “Farmers’, Mechanics’, and Labouring-Man’s Repository” (figure 4.1). In the October 25, 1832 issue, the *Artisan* published a list of thirteen men from cities across New England (including Lowell, Providence,

example of such a paper is the *American Signal and Torch Light of American Labor*, published in Boston, with an elaborately illustrated masthead portraying a mob of immigrants carrying banners in Boston Harbor marching against Nativists carrying flags (American Antiquarian Society).

Pawtucket, and Saco) as its “publishing committee,” illustrating that the paper was intended to appeal to workers from industrial towns throughout New England. The



Figure 4.1 Masthead of *The New England Artisan*. 30 August, 1834. American Antiquarian Society.

content of this issue addresses general working-class issues and highlights gatherings from across the region, including reprints from other labor papers, such as a column entitled “Education” from the “New-Bedford Workingmen’s Press,” the report of a speech by Seth Luther, a traveling labor activist, and an advertisement for the printed version of his *Address*. The prospectus for the *Working Man’s Advocate* of New York encourages readers to connect with workers outside of the region. A practical column, entitled “Knowledge for the People,” explains the workings of wheels and axles. Five poems—two on the front page—are also included. Clearly, the *Artisan* sought a diverse

audience of workers with a wide variety of interests and wanted to connect them through a distinctly working-class newspaper.

More importantly, this inaugural issue's content reflects an explicit understanding of growing class divisions in America, offers a clear definition of the boundaries between classes, and illustrates why a labor press is crucial to working-class consciousness. In the column "Education," the author advocates for a "system of education sufficiently free, rational, and liberal, to qualify all, particularly the children of the poor and needy, as the rich can do well enough, to transact, in a way satisfactory to themselves and others, the important business of life" (1). Democratic education, he claims, will "remedy the existing evils of society" and will "make us, what we ought to be, a happy people; equally educated equally free & equally independent" (1). Not only does the author identify current economic and social inequalities, using the term "us" to refer to workers and their families, he also uses the taboo term "aristocracy" to refer to the rich, stating that they oppose public education out of fear that it will "place side by side children of the rich and poor" (1). A letter from a "Boston Mechanic" also uses the term "aristocracy" while applauding the *Artisan* for speaking in the interest of workers, not the wealthy:

It is well known that the mechanics and laborers here, as elsewhere, have long wanted a press, by which they could speak for themselves. The undue influence exercised over the press, by a monied aristocracy, has been a serious inconvenience, and a great detriment to the laboring community...The mainstream press has controlled and used the newspaper press, to misrepresent us and our measures; but when we wished to reply

through the same medium, our replied were rejected on frivolous pretenses...*Those days are gone!* We now have a press of our own, in the very “*strong hold*” of the aristocracy...I hope that my fellow laborers will feel the advantage thus to be gained, and act accordingly. (2)

Viewing the interests of “mechanics and laborers,” whom he also calls “my fellow laborers,” as opposed to those of the “monied aristocracy,” the Boston mechanic straightforwardly acknowledges class difference—a straightforwardness absent from Larcom and Robinson’s narratives. Furthermore, in printing the term “aristocracy” throughout the October 25 issue, the *Artisan* also insinuates that rigid British class divisions, supposedly absent from American society, are a reality in New England life. Transatlantic class hierarchies are also evident in another column, “The Standing of Useful Labor,” that employs the term “rich lordlings” to describe capitalists and demands that they remove the “oppression and opprobrium the real working men now endure.” By articulating class divisions and positing capitalists—the “aristocracy” of new industrial centers—as the primary cause of these divisions, the *Artisan* illustrates Wilentz’s claim that antebellum working people recognized class divisions between “capitalist employers and employees” as responsible for “social disorder” (17). Even more importantly, the *Artisan* asserts the necessity of a working-class press, which presumes the literacy of working people, to raise consciousness of this situation and to intervene in it.

Compared to the explicit class consciousness voiced in these columns, the poetry included in the October 25 issue of the *Artisan* appears apolitical at first glance. One of these poems, “The Stream Set Free,” appearing on the front page, personifies a stream as free of society’s cares. While the poem appears anonymously in the *Artisan*, it is

attributed to the Romantic poet Felicia Hemans in the October 1832 issue of the *Museum of Foreign Literature and Science*, a reprint miscellany printed in New York and Philadelphia.³⁵ Part of a short series of poems entitled “Songs for Music,” the poem was originally published in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. In the vein of Wordsworth, the poem portrays nature as innocent and sublime:

Flow on, rejoice, make music,
Bright living stream, set free!
The troubled haunts of care and strife
Were not for thee!
...
Once more the holy starlight
Sleeps calm upon thy breast,
Whose brightness bears no token more
Of man’s unrest.

Bearing some resemblance to Larcom’s “The River,” which was inspired by her view of the Merrimack from the mill and, most likely, Larcom’s reading of Hemans, “The Stream Set Free” becomes political in its implicit contrast of the stream’s freedom with man’s “unrest”—articulated by the “Education” author as “the existing evils of society,” or the oppression of one class by another. Toward the end of the poem, the stream, like Larcom’s Merrimack, sympathizes with the working class in its democratic care for

³⁵ *The Museum of Foreign Literature and Science* is a prime example of how reprinting worked in the antebellum period. Issued monthly, the miscellany printed poetry and prose (literary histories, travel writing, political analyses) from prominent British periodicals such as *Blackwood’s*, *the Athenaeum*, and *the Edinburgh Review*. Other Romantic poets are featured often in the summer and fall issues of the *Museum*: Byron, Hogg, Leigh Hunt, Scott, and others make appearances. These texts were then reprinted again in regional and local papers such as the *Artisan*.

“gentle hearts, that bear to thee / their sadness lone,” bringing to them “A sense that Nature ne’er forsakes / The meek and the true.” Read in context with the issue’s other columns, “The Stream Set Free” presents an imagined reversal of economic realities in industrializing New England towns, in which workers—most from rural areas—are favored by Nature, and therefore, by Romantic perspective, the divine. The democratic Romantic discourse of the reprinted poem underscores the overtly democratic discourse of the paper’s political columns, serving the dual purpose of providing literary reading for workers while also promoting the paper’s working-class ideals.

It is likely that the editors of the *Artisan* reprinted “The Stream Set Free” directly from the *Museum*, as an excerpt from “Miss Martineau’s Manchester Strike”—also reprinted in the October issue of the *Museum*—appears on the last page of the paper. The *Artisan*, then, can be seen as part of the process of reprinting that circulated British texts through publishing centers like Philadelphia and New York, into the publishing center of Boston, and outward into smaller mill towns. The *Artisan*’s careful pairing of this Hemans poem from an apolitical reprint miscellany with its overtly working-class rhetoric reveals how the paper employed the broader discourse of Romanticism to communicate class consciousness in general terms. Reprinting the poem also makes it available to readers who might not otherwise have access to it, or might not otherwise be interested in it. Thus the *Artisan* also shapes the nature of working-class literacy, suggesting that poems like this one are what workers should be reading to improve themselves and their class.

At the end of 1832 and into 1833, the *Artisan* often turned its attention to the need for the reform of institutionalized class hierarchy in Britain, and, at the same time, the

danger of class hierarchy becoming institutionalized in America. The paper thus contributes to the mainstream's press's contrast of British and American industrial systems by questioning the contrast instead of superficially supporting it, like Larcom and Robinson. Beneath the headline "Witness the Splendid Example of England," a reprinted article from Allen's *Practical Tourist* describing the harsh, oppressive treatment of textile operatives in England is introduced by "Everett," who states, in summary, "It seems that among the manufacturing districts particularly, an armed force is required to keep the operatives in subjection. After having been ground down to the last morsel of bread. The bayonet is *constantly held to their bosom* by a corrupt government to prevent them from obtaining their rights" (2). Everett then connects this dire situation to that of American workers, who, he argues, will be treated thus if they do not unite against oppression:

Yet there are men in this country, yes, in this city, who look to the glory of England with a desire that we might possess the same... Let our mechanics and laboring men generally look to their rights, or but a few years will show them that liberty tamely given up to avaricious and heartless monopolists, cannot be regained with a sacrifice of *money only*, but they must either crouch at the bayonet's point, or wrest the musket from the hands of the oppressors, and by that last resort repurchase what our fathers' left as a rich legacy to those who have sold their glorious birthright for *sixpence a day*. (2)

Positioning the article about English operatives as a warning, these introductory remarks turn surprisingly radical, particularly in contrast to Larcom and Robinson's attempt to

erase their own oppression by citing that of impoverished English children. Everett not only lessens the gap between the situation of English and American workers, but he spurs readers to take preventative action—violent, if necessary—to protect their remaining liberty. Rejecting out of hand the idea of paternal capitalism, Everett alludes to the present situation of wages being cut by “avaricious and heartless monopolists” with the phrase “sacrifice of money only” and implicitly calls out strike-breakers by referring to those who accept lower wages “tamely” as those who have “sold their glorious birthright for sixpence a day.”³⁶ By including this introduction to a reprinted article about textile workers in England, the *Artisan* compares instead of contrasts the oppression of American and British textile workers, but also broadens this oppression to include other American workers, as well, showing that textile workers and other manual laborers are part of the same working class.

To provide further evidence that the mistreatment of New England factory workers was already taking place, the next page of the November 1, 1832 issue contains a report written “for the Artisan” about the about the plight of a mill girl in Exeter, New Hampshire who failed to give two weeks notice before leaving her position and was therefore denied her pay (3). Calling the agent “his majesty” and “his most royal highness” in order to highlight his similarity to British manufacturers, the column reports that the agent informed the naïve girl that she had committed a crime “sufficient to carry her to the states prison,” that crime being “*she had violated the laws of the factory*” (3). Revealing the disproportionate institutionalized power of capitalists over their laborers, the column concludes, “In these days of oppression the strong arm of the law ought to be

³⁶ By the 1830s, several strikes had already taken place in textile towns across New England, but with few positive results.

extended for the protection of the laborer. But where alas! Where shall the laborer look for protection, when the laws of the factory are omnipotent?" (3). In answer to this question, the author proposes the union of workers: "Let the laboring classes unite[sic] their strength, and success is certain" (3). It is significant to note that this unity includes mill girls. While the paper does not include "operatives" in its subtitle, this column and others in the subsequent issues reveal that the *Artisan* included female workers and the wives of male workers under the gender-specific term "working men." According to the paper, mechanics, laborers, and mill girls alike experienced oppression within a corrupt economic system that gave capitalists undue freedom at the expense of their workers' freedom, resembling the flaws of the British system. By overtly connecting the disenfranchisement and mistreatment of different types of laborers, the *Artisan* promotes the growth of class consciousness in industrialized New England, encouraging readers to imagine a future in which working-class unity leads to social change.

In the context of this militant rhetoric, which continues appearing in the *Artisan*, particularly in reporting about British operatives, the appearance of two whimsical poems by Byron seems dissonant at first. In the November 8, 1832 and April 11, 1833 issues, an excerpt of "Lines addressed to Inez" from "the new edition of Byron's works," and "Lord Byron's Verses on Sam Rogers, in Question and Answer" appear, respectively. Unlike the Hemans poem, the reprinted Byron poems do not personify or idealize nature, but instead look backward to Renaissance love poetry and the eighteenth-century lampoon. Like the Hemans poem, both Byron poems are reprinted from recent publications. The "new edition" that Inez has been excerpted from is *The Works of Lord Byron, with His Letters and Journals, and His Life, by Thomas Moore*, brought out by Murray in London

and reprinted in America.³⁷ The Sam Rogers lampoon, like the Hemans poem, appears in the *Museum of Foreign Literature and Science* published in April 1833. On a basic level, the inclusion of these poems in the *Artisan* alongside radical working-class sentiments speaks to the paper's desire to provide not only a political but a literary education to working-class readers. Exposing readers to the most recent reprintings of Byron's poetry—the same reprintings that the middle and upper classes read—advances the notion that those who work with their hands are full participants in intellectual and literary life.

Yet the discourse surrounding the publication and reprinting of these poems reveals that the *Artisan's* agenda in providing them to readers is more complex than simply to provide a literary education. Looking at the context of the Sam Rogers poem in the *Museum*, it becomes apparent that while the poem seems apolitical, its publication spurred debate about not only Byron's literary importance, but also the reputation of Thomas Moore, the Irish Catholic poet of humble origins who was also Byron's friend and biographer. The April issue of the *Museum* reprints an article from the London *Times* entitled "Lord Byron and Mr. Rogers" that condemns Byron for writing the 1818 poem lampooning Rogers, a poet and literary powerbroker in Regency London, calling him "destitute of principles" and bringing his poetic genius into question. The *Museum* also reprints an article from *Frazer's Magazine* that similarly dismisses Byron and demeans Moore's biography, saying it was "improperly committed to him" as a part of a Whig political maneuver to repress the more scandalous aspects of Byron's life. The article dismisses Moore as a lesser poet than Byron or Rogers because he is dependent upon the

³⁷ This text must have been widely circulating in America, because it appears in virtually all of the library catalogs I surveyed from New England in the 1830s and 1840s.

patronage of the Whigs and so must write Byron's biography essentially for them. The poem, in this context, follows the article and includes numerous footnotes that defend Sam Rogers at Byron and Moore's expense.

Byron's reputation as a political radical—despite his own aristocratic title—and his influence among working-class readers in Britain appear to influence the *Artisan* to take Byron's and Moore's side of the debate. The *Artisan's* reprinting of Moore's "Hymn on the Death of Byron," along with three of his other poems, in the February 21, 1833 issue, crystallizes the importance of Byron's poetry and his persona to working-class readers. With the refrain "Thou art not dead—Thou art not dead!" structuring the poem, Moore asserts that Byron's "god-like" spirit lives on in the "myrtle" that grows around his grave:

Throughout all time, with leaves unshed—
The patriot's hope, the tyrant's dread,—
Round Freedom's shrine shall grow.

Referencing Byron's radical politics, Moore asserts that Byron's political credo lives on in the lives of those who continue to read his poetry.³⁸ The *Artisan*, by reprinting Byron's Sam Rogers poem without the notes and Moore's eulogy, asserts the importance of Byron's life and poetry to the working-class cause, and also defends Moore's poetic worth against his aristocratic British detractors. That Moore was a Dublin grocer's son, an advocate for Catholic Emancipation of Ireland, a supporter of European revolutions, and an abolitionist makes it even more significant that the *Artisan* reprinted his poems

³⁸ While Byron's political activities and allegiances were inconsistent, he earned a reputation as a radical when he appeared before the House of Lords on three occasions, advocating for "personal liberty" in support of "poor mechanics," the rights of Catholics, and the "people's right to petition government for reform" (Felluga 73). At the end of his life, he also supported Italian and Greek struggles for independence (73).

along with Byron's (Schirmer 17). Reading Byron's and Moore's reprinted poems beside columns calling for militant, worker-led economic reform, a working-class aesthetic of reprinting develops in relationship to working-class consciousness. Byron's questioning of entrenched political hierarchies in Britain and Europe, as well as his disregard for literary propriety, evident in the Sam Rogers lampoon, makes his poetry a companion discourse to the *Artisan's* political reporting, which rejects the institutionalization of old-world hierarchies in America. Like Heman's "A Stream Set Free," Byron's poems serve the *Artisan's* dual purpose of placing recent reprints within the reach of working-class readers and providing a literary dimension to *Artisan's* discourse of class consciousness. In both instances, Romantic poetry helps the *Artisan* to intervene in the pro-American, anti-British rhetoric that masks class difference in America, while also representing the literacy of a diverse yet cohesive American working class.

***The Voice of Industry* (Fitchburg and Lowell, 1845-1847)**

Over a decade after the *Artisan* ceased publication, after the Panic of 1837 and the economic recession lifted in the early 1840s, New England workers began organizing again through some of the same institutions—mechanics' institutes and workingmen's organizations. In the 1840s, however, women began to become not only visible in but central to these organizations. While improvement circles were becoming popular among mill girls, some of the same women who initially participated in them—Sarah Bagley and Huldah Stone, to name the most prominent—became leaders in labor organizations that had previously been led by men. As a result, they became central to the publishing and editing of and reporting for the *Voice of Industry*, a weekly workingmens' association paper that became the prominent regional pro-labor newspaper in the mid-1840s.

Illustrating the unity that already existed between diverse workers in eastern Massachusetts, the *Voice of Industry* bears striking similarity to the *Artisan* in its aim to increase class consciousness through print.

Sarah Bagley and Hulah Stone, integral contributors to the *Voice of Industry*, were Lowell mill girls who, in the mid-1840s, formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, which met in the Middlesex Mechanics' Reading Room and worked closely with the male Mechanics' and Laborers' Association, showing that mill girls were not an isolated class in antebellum New England. They also became delegates to the New England Workingmen's Association, later called the New England Labor Reform League, which lobbied again and again for ten-hour workday legislation.³⁹ Unlike Larcom and Robinson, little is known about Bagley and Stone apart from their labor activism. Bagley, who described herself as a "common schooled New England female factory operative," taught an evening school, became well known for her eloquent and fiery speeches at labor gatherings, and traveled to many New England factory towns to begin new labor associations.⁴⁰ She seems to have been instrumental to the *Voice's* move from Fitchburg to Lowell in late 1845 and served on its editorial board until 1846 (Foner, *Factory Girls* 159). Hulah Stone, also an operative, became a traveling agent for the *Voice* as well as the secretary of the New England Workingmen's Association; in the course of her travels, she became a labor organizer, speaking at several all-male mechanics' meetings across New England (178). As mill girls who shared the philosophy of self-improvement through literacy with Larcom and Robinson, but who regarded that

³⁹ For more about the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, see Zonderman chapter 7, "From the Streets to the Halls" and Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, chapter 4, "The Battle for the Ten Hour Day."

⁴⁰ For the most complete biographical sketch of Bagley, see Helena Wright's "Sarah Bagley: A Biographical Note."

literacy as a means of working-class empowerment instead of denial, Bagley and Stone shaped the transition of the *Voice* from a local mechanics' paper in Fitchburg to a regional labor paper that circulated working-class consciousness through a distinctly literary lens.

Like the *Artisan*, the *Voice* was founded by male workers who prioritized uniting the diverse New England working class through a paper that deemphasized allegiance to political parties and ethnicity. The first issue, dated May 29, 1845, can almost be seen as a manifesto of working-class politics by W. F. Young, the editor, speaking in behalf of the Fitchburg Workingmen's Association. Using the quote "Hearken to me. I also, will shown mine opinion" in the masthead, Young prints his "Address, delivered before the Workingmen's Association of Fitchburg... 'On the existing evils of society'" as a prospectus for the *Voice's* agenda. Emphasizing the importance of individual workers' intelligence and "imagination," Young states that the *Voice* encourages workers to use these traits to "promote the united prosperity of all...keeping in view the great fundamental upon which we are planted, and with an eye single, to the best interests of the whole" (2). Therefore, the *Voice's* "object" is "not to elevate this or that party to office; or to foster sects or creeds," but instead the "elevation of mankind" by exposing sources of "contention, strife, and misery" in society (2).⁴¹ Young then applies the *Voice's* aim specifically to the position of the laborer in society:

Its efforts will be engaged in removing as far as possible the deadly
incubus which oppressive laws and customs have hung over our people,
which abridges the free and full exercise of all the legitimate faculties of

⁴¹ Another column declares that "political, sectarian, and party presses ... make dupes of the mass, keeping them ignorant of their true natures and interests, and fills the community with dogmatical errors and contracted tenets" that lead to a "vicious education," bigotry, and "ambitious aspirancy" (3).

their natures—thereby virtually denying the rights to labor and freedom in choosing those pursuits adapted to their various natural capacities. It will strive to clear honest industry from the stigma and contempt placed upon it by the mass of society who would be thought popular and to respect and elevate the laborer to that station in community to which he is entitled by virtue of his office. (2)

Significantly, in speaking to the elevation of laborers, Young rejects class denial and instead embraces class consciousness, advocating reforming society so that the manual laborer can be viewed with equality and human dignity. In order to set about this task, Young declares that the *Voice* aims to counter-represent laborers so that they, as well as the “masses,” will see manual labor as work to be respected, not to be abandoned in pursuit of social mobility. Praising “working men and women” and condemning those who live off the “sweat of others,” the *Voice* believes that “all should labor physically, mentally, and morally...and...that all should receive such a share of the fruits of their labor as will conduce in the highest possible degree to their happiness” (2). In articulating class consciousness in this manner, the *Voice* combines the traditional Yankee value of hard work with a critique of “manufacturers” who damage the very fabric of society by oppressing their workers, setting “capital against labor, State against State, man against man.” Young’s articulation of the paper’s democratic purpose, like the *Artisan*’s, also supports Wilentz’s claim that workers in the antebellum Northeast were aware of “a new order of human relations” that privileged capitalists, and that this awareness brought about class consciousness despite differences of political party, religion, and ethnicity (17-18).

Condemning the actions of manufacturers, a letter addressed to “Friends and Brothers,” also appearing in the inaugural issue, is careful to point out that “ours is a warfare with systems rather than individuals” (3). Yet Young adamantly asserts that the paper’s class struggle is a form of warfare, and connects this class warfare to recent revolutions, “the war for man’s inalienable birthrights so nobly began by the working people of this country and Europe” (3). Young then quotes the Declaration of Independence, as the *Artisan* did, calling workers to assert their God-given right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (3). Bidding readers to “arouse to a true sense of our situation,” Young articulates the “burdens” that will “not be lightened so long as we supinely submit and foster the very system from which they emanate” (3). Echoing the *Artisan*, Young predicts hardships imposed upon workers increasing in the future, and asks that they “reason together and see if some way cannot be devised to throw off the shackles that bind us—which unless put asunder will descend with tenfold weight and oppression to posterity” (3). In response, Young continues, “Let us consult together in manly friendship...treating those who are wronging us as a class, *as men*, and demanding the same treatment from them” (3). The *Voice*, like the *Artisan* a decade earlier, clearly demonstrates working-class consciousness and articulates its participation in class-based struggle through the Revolutionary rhetoric of human rights and equality, using this rhetoric to expose class divisions instead of disguising them, as corporate-sponsored print had.

Ironically, despite references to masculinity, the *Voice*’s class warfare is often visibly fought by women, which becomes apparent in the first few months of the paper’s run, mainly through a print debate between Sarah Bagley and Harriet Farley about

working-class representation and the *Lowell Offering*. By emphasizing the importance and dignity of labor and revealing how manufacturers worked against this through low wages, poor working conditions, and long hours, the *Voice* avoided the cognitive dissonance that led Harriet Robinson to praise the Boston Associates in order to hold her own labor in high regard. In the first few months of its run, the *Voice* directly counters this attitude as it appears in the *Offering* and in the pro-manufacturing paper the *Lowell Courier* by suggesting that in order to assert the dignity of labor, the grim realities of its present state must be exposed and reformed. By directly confronting corporate-controlled print through the writing of a radical mill girl, the *Voice* illustrates the existence of a much more diverse working-class readership than the *Offering* represented to a transatlantic audience.

By the time of the *Voice*'s appearance in 1845, three volumes of the *Offering* had appeared, and the paper had achieved transatlantic visibility, thanks to Harriet Martineau's *Mind Among the Spindles*, a collection of writings from the *Offering* published in Britain. It had also become clear that while the contributors to the *Offering* were mill girls, the intended audience of the magazine was corporate apologists, not other operatives. The *Voice*, on the other hand, stridently emphasized that it was published for and by workers without any help from corporate interests. In its first issue, the *Voice* announced that the paper was to be supported by workers only and not by "slavish pledging" (3). This is an indirect criticism of the *Offering*, which was owned by William Schuyler, editor of the *Courier* and apologist for the Boston Associates, and supported by the Associates themselves since its early days. Furthermore, the *Voice* clarifies that its content was written not only by but for the working class: "Fellow workingmen—to you

we have much to say,” the first issue declares, while also requesting that readers submit their own writing to the paper, as well (3).

In the July 17, 1845 issue, the *Voice* begins reporting on the epistolary debate, printed in the *Courier* and the *Lowell Advertiser*, between Bagley and Farley, the editor of the *Offering*, over the magazine’s “slavish pledging” and how it influenced the false representation of workers within the magazine. The debate had begun with Bagley’s public disparaging of the *Offering*, during her speech at a workers’ meeting in Woburn, as a manufacturer-controlled publication that rejected submissions portraying factory conditions negatively. Bagley claimed that some of her own submissions to the *Offering* had been rejected for this very reason, while others had been accepted. Farley, hearing of these comments, defended herself in a letter to the *Courier*, but Bagley, suspicious of the *Courier*’s editor, Schouler, decided to boycott that paper and replied in a letter to the *Advertiser* instead. The *Voice* then reprinted Bagley’s response, adding its own editorial comments about the debate, mainly to defend Bagley’s position. Stating that Bagley spoke in “kind and courteous terms” about Farley and stated “*undeniable*” facts about the *Offering*, Young writes, “It is, and always has been under the fostering care of the Lowell corporations...and the tendency of it always has been to varnish over the evils, wrongs, and privations of factory life” (3). He then emphasizes the problem of corporate sponsorship: “We wish to have the *Offering* stand upon its own bottom, instead of going out as the united voice of the Lowell corporations, while it wears the corporation lock and their apologizers hold the keys” (3). In this way, the *Voice* echoes Bagley’s concluding statement in the *Advertiser* letter that her purpose in writing was not to “evince that that there is ‘mind among the spindles,’ but to show that the minds here are not all spindles”

(3). This quip is significant because it shows that the *Voice* upholds the *Offering's* purpose of representing workers as literate, but differs from the *Offering* in its suggestion that workers must support the corporate status quo in order to be seen as social equals. The *Voice's* comments on the Bagley-Farley debate suggest that workers' literacy should be independent of the machinery of corporate interests.

As the press war between Bagley and Farley continued in print and even in Farley's improvement circle, where Bagley and Farley faced each other in person before an audience of operatives, the *Voice* published more objections to the *Offering*, providing evidence for workers' independent thinking. One letter, from "Olivia," reveals how some operatives, who had already formed a union, had also formed a committee to investigate "false stories published in some of the papers of this city, and exposing them to the public" (3). Olivia remarks that the *Offering* debate "has been useful, as an impetus to action"—the action of disproving those who "are prepared to allow others to think and act for them; and themselves be only the machines to give expression to the will and opinions of others" (3). Turning the rhetoric of the *Offering*—that operatives are not simply machines, but intellectual beings—against it, Olivia likens losing control of self-expression to physical and mental servitude. In response to this debasement, Olivia claims that operatives now "feel very much the need of a periodical here devoted to our cause" and are "determined to speak here more clearly with your 'Voice' in the future, and see if we cannot awaken a more general interest" (3). Olivia's letter reveals how the debate over the *Offering* between two highly literate operatives with conflicting political agendas galvanized the *Voice* to wrest literary representation from factory apologists and their "machines" and redefine it in the paper.

The *Offering* debate highlights not only disagreements about the role of the press and the existence of a working class, but the importance of using of literary texts to represent the working class. Suggesting that the *Offering*, a literary magazine, cannot be trusted to represent workers literarily, the *Voice* provides alternate literary content *for* working-class readers *by* working-class readers that, interestingly, is influenced by the same reprinted British texts that influenced the *Offering's* authors. From its early issues, the *Voice* emphasized literary content, particularly poetry, which always appeared on the front page.⁴² This shows that, like the *Artisan*, the *Voice* saw literary content as important and appealing to readers, who would peruse the first page before the rest of the paper. A significant difference between the *Voice* and the *Artisan*, however, is that the *Voice* reprinted fewer British poems outright, instead soliciting original poetry by working-class readers clearly influenced by the Romantics. While the *Voice* includes fewer British reprints, several of the *Voice's* prose columns clearly reference Romantic ideas and even directly quote from Romantic poetry, developing a concrete connection between the practice of reading Romantic poetry and class consciousness that the *Artisan* merely inferred. Why the shift from reprinting British poetry itself in the *Artisan* to showcasing the influence of British poetry in the *Voice*? As can be seen in the *Offering* debate and Olivia's response, the *Voice* wanted to compete with the *Offering* by including literary texts written by operatives. Bagley had already established that literary representations of work and workers in the *Offering* could not be trusted; therefore, the *Voice* became an alternative means of reading and submitting class-conscious poetry. When the *Offering* ceased publication at the end of 1845, at least in part because of bad publicity among

⁴² Reprinted serialized fiction often appears on the front page of the paper as well, but there are some exceptions to this. Poetry, on the other hand, appears in every issue of the *Voice*.

operatives, the *Voice's* literary columns took its place. Like the *Artisan*, the *Voice* saw poetry as a companion discourse to political reporting about working-class issues, but placed a higher value on working-class self-representation that supported their efforts at increasing class consciousness.

British poetry, particularly by the Romantics, remained an important aspect of working-class literacy, but the growth of cheap libraries with open access in mill towns in the mid to late 1840s reveals that the need for the reprinting of Romantic poetry in newspapers may have diminished. Working-class readers had access to these texts without having to purchase them. In Lowell alone, there were several cheap sources for borrowing books, and all of them contained multiple selections of Romantic poetry. Joshua Merrill's circulating library, for instance, seems to have been designed for poor factory operatives; in his catalog, printed as a pamphlet for free distribution, he writes,

As it is beyond the power of most persons to furnish themselves with the new and the popular books that are constantly being issued, I am induced to open a Circulating Library that shall contain all the new and valuable books that are announced from time to time as soon as published, trusting that it will meet the wants and patronage of the reading public.

Offering several subscription tiers—\$2.00 for a year, \$1.25 for six months, and \$.75 for a quarter—Merrill's library also allowed non-subscribers to borrow books for as little as \$.5 per week.⁴³ The library's collection included Shelley's *Poetical Works* and *Reminiscences of Coleridge and Southey* alongside political texts such as *Sketches of Reforms and Reformers in Great Britain and Ireland* and *Peasant Life and Political Clubs in France*. Literary magazines that often printed Romantic poetry were also

⁴³ All library catalogs held at the American Antiquarian Society.

available to borrow, such as *Blackwood's Magazine*. Another Lowell circulating library, Bixby and Whiting's, offered similarly cheap and flexible rates, along with the titles *Beauties and Sublimities of Nature*, Moore's *Life of Byron*, *Poetry of Traveling*, Scott's *Poetical Works*, and *Selections from British Poets*. The Lowell City School Library had an even wider selection for less money. Kept in City Hall "for the common use and benefit of the inhabitants of the City," the library board ruled that "any person resident in the City shall be permitted to enjoy the privileges of the library by paying fifty cents per annum, and by giving references or security for the safe-keeping and return of the books, satisfactory to the directors of the library" (iv). This library, to which Larcom turned to study English poetry, contained extensive holdings of Romantic poetry: collections of Barbauld, Burns, Byron, Coleridge, Hemans, Keats, Scott, and Wordsworth were all available, as well as more general collections such as *Works of British Poets*, *British Female Poets*, and Hazlitt's *English Poets*.

Additionally, the Middlesex Mechanics' Library, housed in the reading room of Mechanics' Hall, which had become a meeting place for organizations such as the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, contained, according to the 1840 catalog, collections of Barbauld, Burns, Byron, Coleridge, Scott, Southey, and Wordsworth, as well as *Blackwood's Magazine*, *London Quarterly Review*, and the *Edinburgh Review*. While the library and reading room were supported by members of the association, men "working in manufacturing," children, wives, friends, and even "strangers" could use the library with a member's permission, and "any citizen of Lowell" could subscribe to either the library or reading room for \$3.00 per year. The use of the reading room as a meeting space for local and regional labor organizations would expose many non-members to its

contents. Like the circulating and public libraries, the Middlesex Mechanics' Library and Reading Room were open during hours when operatives were free—evenings after 7pm, Saturdays, and Sundays before and after church. This library is particularly significant because it became a political gathering place for male and female workers that provided both access to a range of texts, revealing that literacy did not divide workers, but united them.

The range of libraries in Lowell and their holdings illustrates the demand for cheap print of great variety by the primarily working-class inhabitants of the city. That these libraries all contained Romantic poetry reveals a specific demand for it, suggesting that patrons continued to find it relevant into the 1840s. The more consistent and reliable access to books and periodicals represented by these libraries meant less reliance on newspapers for reprinted literary content as well as the assumption that working-class readers would already have been exposed to the principle Romantic poets represented in these library catalogs. For the *Voice*, this meant more space for working-class poetry inspired by the reading of Romantic poetry that challenged literary representations in the *Offering*. Sustained exposure to Romantic poetry allowed writers for the *Voice* to make direct connections between literary representation and working-class consciousness, relying upon reprints in Lowell libraries instead of within the paper itself to provide primary texts.

The *Voice* printed many poems by working people that were influenced by the Romantics, including some, like “The Mechanic,” that were written specifically for the *Voice*, and others, like “The Voice of the Wind,” that were reprinted from other labor papers. Anonymous, “The Mechanic” illustrates the influence of Romantic poetry and

ideas on working-class representation by portraying the worker as “Nature’s own nobleman, happy and free” despite his separation from nature itself. In fact, the poem describes the building of cities and ships, lauding workers for contributing to civilization, not for their commune with rural surroundings. Instead, the poet emphasizes that the mechanic’s harmony with nature comes from his separation from wealth, ambition, and power. The smith, for example,

...toils not for happiness or power, not he
He dreads not lost office, he seeks none to gain,
And the smithy’s a king in his own proud domain.

Influenced by the Romantic ideal of separating oneself from the corruption of society, the poem portrays the worker as contributing positively to human progress while remaining aloof from its dark aspects.

“A Lesson from the Wind,” written by Amelia and originally printed in *Factory Tract No. 1*, the first in a series of pro-labor literary magazines, is constructed as a dialogue between the speaker and the wind that highlights commonalities between workers. After the speaker asks the wind, “What hast thou seen since the morning broke,” the wind responds with a panoramic description of humanity that ultimately focuses on the suffering and nobility of working people. The wind describes factory workers from Pittsburgh to New England as coming from “haunts / of cheerless toil and gloom” but “bring[ing] hearts, minds and souls to feel / and principle to act” (1). At the poem’s conclusion, the wind compares workers’ current struggle to gain equality with the American Revolution, and determines that the struggle now “waft[s]” a “prouder, higher,

and nobler strain” (1). Situating workers within natural surroundings, the poem ultimately portrays unionization as a force of nature:

With the broad green earth beneath their feet,
God’s glorious heaven o’ver them!
Justice and Truth, their watchword is,
Freedom the goal before them.

Yet while the “tempest’s foam” may be “check[ed],” and the “roaring sea” bound, the wind declares, “Never shall thou fetter down / Their souls to slavery” (1). This poem, like “The Mechanic,” adapts the Romantic ideal of nature as symbol of freedom, independence, and democracy to a specifically working-class subject, depicting workers en masse as a natural force.

“Freedom,” appearing in the July 31, 1845 issue, begins with an epigraph from Byron’s *Childe Harold*: “Hereditary Bondsmen! Know yet not / Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?” Evoking Byron’s epic poem in which the freeing of the enslaved is a primary focus, the poem uses the ocean as a metaphor for freedom from human oppression, particularly, in this case, private ownership of land, which often meant that those who labored on private land did not share in its profits.⁴⁴ As many farmers and other small landowners were losing their land to the banks, this same land was being bought cheaply by the corporations to expand their mills and to rent to workers. Increasing bank and corporate ownership of land came to represent the

⁴⁴ This sentiment led to the formation of the Free Soil Party in 1848, comprised of anti-slavery factions of the Whig and Democratic Parties. Free Soil supporters wanted free land to be given to settlers in the West and for western states to be free states instead of slave. This ideology became popular among New England workers later in the 1840s. In fact, several Free Soil candidates were elected to office in Massachusetts in 1851 and worked toward Ten Hour legislation (Dublin 201). Working-class British immigrants were also involved in the Free Soil Movement, such as Thomas Ainge Devyr, a former Chartist from Newcastle who organized militant working-class groups in New York. For more on Devyr, see Ray Boston’s *British Chartists in America, 1839-1900* (1971).

“enslavement” of workers to their employers, which workers saw as analogous to chattel slavery of the South.⁴⁵ In this poem, the ocean and the land are foils, with the ocean representing the unfettered power of nature, while land capitulates to human control. The poem begins by contrasting the freedom of the ocean with captivity of man to land:

Ocean! Boundless, wild, and free
Ever proudly, widely rolling,
Might in thy liberty,
Past the power of man’s controlling;
Marks and bounds are not for thee,
Chains and fetters cannot bind thee.

The anonymous poet contrasts this with the plight of man, who

...may not freely share
In the fruits of his creation,
For though hunger wild demands
Bread produced by Labor’s hands,
Laws deny with stern commands;
LAND is not free!

The second stanza of the poem portrays the “hoarse roar” of the ocean as a rallying cry to “the slave” on “every shore” to “Be free—be free!”

⁴⁵ The terms “slavery” and “slave” appear relatively often in working-class newspapers, American and British. Sometimes these terms are used in reference to actual slaves and support the abolitionist movement; at other times, they are used to compare white workers to chattel slaves. This could become problematic, as this comparison was sometimes used to exaggerate the oppression of white workers while diminishing the oppression of slaves. The *Voice of Industry* seems to have engaged in both aspects of “slave” rhetoric. For the seminal discussion of this issue, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, particularly chapter 4, in which he discusses use of the term “slave” by the white working class. For an examination of British working-class poets’ use of the slavery comparison, see Kelly Mays, “Slaves in Heaven, Laborers in Hell: Chartist Poets’ Ambivalent Identification with the (Black) Slave.”

Brothers, ye hear the ocean chimes,
Rouse ye, rouse ye, now or never!
Would ye, toilers, longer lie,
Sinking in hopeless slavery?
Speak the word—and it shall be,
Land shall be free!

Like the quote from *Childe Harold*, the poem ends with a focus on action. In order for workers to achieve freedom, which, in the context of the poem means to “freely share / in the fruits of ...creation,” they must “rouse” themselves and “speak” against the tyranny of private land ownership. The Byron epigraph functions as a means of connecting the interests of New England workers to a larger discourse of freedom that includes European revolutionaries and chattel slaves. Romanticism again becomes a discourse for class consciousness, a means of uniting workers through literacy instead of isolating them.

These poems are not the only evidence of Romantic influence in the *Voice*; original prose reporting also directly reveals the perceived power of Romantic discourse to motivate class consciousness. Another Romantic epigraph, this one from Hemans, appears at the beginning of a prose column by Huldah Stone entitled “The Hopes of Earth.” This was Stone’s second regular column for the *Voice*: in the July 31, 1845 issue, the paper announced that Stone would become a regular correspondent on behalf of the Female Reform Association; in the August 7th issue, her first column, “Improvements of Time,” had appeared. In her first column, written in the style of a jeremiad or sermon, Stone encourages workers to spend more time pursuing the “sublimities of truth” through

reading, for it is only by “hungering and thirsting after knowledge” that workers can “raise [their] voices” against “slavery” (3). According to Stone, pursuing the written word will allow readers to understand the “infinitely variegated and sublimely glorious world” that the “senses” allow humans to enjoy. Learning to recognize the notes of “Nature’s joyful choir” through the “right improvement of our time” keeps readers from becoming enslaved to the body and its desires. Stone goes as far as to suggest that social reform cannot be achieved without education, which, for her, as for the Romantics, was a connection between the senses and the sublime, individuals and nature. Similarly, “The Hopes of Earth” connects the temporal to the immortal, instructing readers to focus on “love for great humanity” instead of “earth’s delusive phantoms.” This message is inspired by Hemans’s lines: “They that fix / Affection’s perfect trust on aught of earth / Have many a dream to start from.” Reflecting the era’s interest in literary biography, Stone begins the column by stating that the lines by this “gifted and universally admired Authoress” were “but the faithful echoes of a bruised and broken spirit,” illustrating that the “hopes of earth are fleeting.” While the implications of this seem antithetical to labor reform, which called for better conditions on earth, not in heaven, Stone ends the column by revealing that working toward communal good allows readers to transcend the “things of time.” Calling the reader a “Child of genius,” Stone merges the Romantic notion of transcending the bonds of humanity with the communal values of the labor movement, using Hemans as the link.

In subsequent columns, Stone links Romantic ideas and the practical goals of the antebellum labor movement more concretely. In “Our Cause,” Stone describes the work of the *Voice* as that of a plant, which will “go forth, bearing precious seed, which shall

take deep root in the mental soil, and bring forth fruit abundantly!” (qtd. in Foner, *Factory Girls* 181). These seeds of “truth,” sown from the “independent press,” will “show every workingman and woman...their abject state of slavery to capital and capitalists under existing circumstances” (181).⁴⁶ In a “Letter to the Voice” from Cabot, New Hampshire, Stone similarly connects the message of the *Voice* to the defeat of ignorance among workers. In this column, however, Stone condemns unthinking allegiance to religion, declaring,

It is time to leave mysteries to the moles and bats, and commence studying the beautiful—the sublime volume of Nature, if we should learn of God aright. We must know him through his works. They are ever before us—ever the same. Infinite skill and wisdom is stamped on their every feature. Harmony and grandeur conspire to fill the soul with emotions of deepest reverence and love toward the Great and Mighty Architect! We must all be students in the great laboratory of Nature...if we would live as rational, intelligent beings, and enjoy the rich and glorious feast of soul which wisdom and true knowledge ever yields.

Significantly, Stone employs Romantic philosophy to disconnect God from religion and its complicity in social hierarchies, instead portraying God as democratically available to all who can appreciate nature. The *Voice*, enabling readers to see beyond the “mysteries,” or entrapments, of religion, will cause “the waste places around us to become gardens of truth’s own planting” (185). Again using the seed-sowing metaphor, Stone connects the

⁴⁶ Stone, unlike some writers for the American labor press, was careful to differentiate between chattel slavery and wage slavery: she admits that the overall condition of wage slaves is better because they are not sold or beaten (Foner, *Factory Girls* 182). Similarly, Lucy Larcom’s poem “Weaving” also avoids too close a comparison, linking female textile laborers with southern slave women but suggesting that they are far more oppressed.

message of the *Voice* to the democratic truths of nature, which disrupt social and economic hierarchies.

In “Looking Beneath the Surface,” Stone underscores this connection while disputing the claim that operatives’ intelligence is the result of their work in the factory, an anti-reform position. Stone asserts that operatives did not become intelligent from “bending in unnatural positions thirteen hours per day over machinery, whose clatter is sufficient to confuse the clearest head, and cause the whole intellectual machinery to run out of gear.” Instead, operatives “gathered their intellectual treasures among the green hills and fertile vales of their own loved mountain homes, where the pure air of heaven, gave life and animation to the whole being—where earth’s variegated beauties and harmonies, all combined to fill the soul with rapture and peace” (189). Stone undermines the paternalist claim that the Boston Associates were responsible for the operatives’ intelligence by employing the Romantic opposition between nature and industrialization. Instead of the mill being a “school,” as Robinson later argued, Stone suggests that nature is the basis of learning, and therefore, operatives learn despite their working conditions, not because of them. This opposition between the natural and the industrial leads Stone to conclude by wondering how a “factory population,” born and raised in mill towns “like Jonah’s Gourd,” will become “an educated, intelligent people.” The literacy of mill workers had allowed the capitalists profiting from cheap labor to defend their right to that profit, connecting literacy to paternalism. Stone disputes their argument without sacrificing the representation of operatives as literate, intelligent workers, doing so primarily through allusions to Romanticism, a discourse in which operatives had become conversant since the 1830s.

Stone's use of Romantic discourse, like the *Voice of Industry's* poems by and about workers, disentangles working-class literacy from highly visible, corporate-sponsored magazines like the *Lowell Offering* that used mill-girl literacy to portray American textile corporations in a positive light. While the *Offering's* representation of mill-girl literacy had the effect of masking their oppression and therefore elevating them above the working class, the *Voice* employed Romantic discourse to represent a diverse, literate working class that included mill girls, mechanics, artisans, and other laborers. By paralleling literacy and class consciousness, the *Voice* continued the work of the *New England Artisan*, which had, a decade before, similarly asserted the existence of working-class solidarity by pairing political reporting with reprints of Romantic poetry. The *Voice* and the *Artisan*, taken together, illustrate that a cohesive working class existed in antebellum New England, and that they valued literacy not as a means of class evasion, but as a means of unity.

III. The *Boston Pilot* and Irish Participation in Working-Class Literacy

As I have shown in the previous section, the "genteel" narrative of literacy in Lowell, which asserts a lack of cohesive class consciousness among textile operatives and other working-class occupations, is contradicted by the *New England Artisan* and the *Voice of Industry*, papers published by and circulated to a diverse population of workers across New England. Employing Romantic discourse as an anti-capitalist discourse, the papers reclaimed working-class literacy from the mainstream, pro-capitalist press and encouraged workers to practice literacy as a means of class consciousness instead of class mobility.

Yet a fundamental strand of the genteel literacy argument remains unexamined: the widely accepted assumption that Irish immigrant workers and their children in New

England mill towns were a separate class, excluded from Yankee working-class institutions by prejudice, and thus were largely illiterate.⁴⁷ This thesis coincides with the genteel narrative of working-class literacy and the Counter-Progressive view of antebellum workers—which, according to Wilentz, regarded workers as essentially divided by partisan and ethnic loyalties—and thus depends upon similar half-truths (8). Just as the genteel narrative is based upon the writings of mill girls who publically supported it, the parallel illiterate Irish narrative is based on the very real discrimination of Irish immigrants in antebellum New England. Excluded from employment as mill operatives until the 1840s, the Irish in mill towns were forced into the lowest working-class positions—laborers and washer-women. They were also largely excluded from corporate housing until the 1840s and in many cases kept their children from public schools because of the fear of Protestant proselytizing. Occasional mobs attacked Irish neighborhoods and churches, and the Nativist movement grew as immigration rates rose, sanctioning anti-immigrant violence.⁴⁸

While these are documented facts, they only tell part of the story of the place of Irish immigrants in the antebellum working class, and they largely deny the existence of literacy among Irish workers in mill towns. This is because the education and literacy of the Irish were not made visible by the mainstream press: by the 1850s, when the textile corporations began to hire Irish operatives in larger numbers, the paternal pretensions of the Boston Associates had been largely abandoned, and they no longer had an interest in

⁴⁷ This assumption is sometimes stated outright in histories of textile work in New England, such as when Zonderman justifies ending his study of textile workers' writings in 1850 because of the advent of Irish workers, among whom "the literacy rate... was far lower than that of previous native-born workers" (10). Other scholars accept this assumption without question, as when Dublin assumes that the 128 illiterate workers (out of 557) at the Hamilton Corporation in 1850 were Irish (151). It is unknown how Dublin defines literacy, or where in the Hamilton records these statistics come from.

⁴⁸ In the 1850s, the *Pilot* not only reported on current mob violence, but also memorialized past tragedies in works of short fiction.

publicizing the literacy of their workers. In fact, it can be argued that the corporations were better served to keep the continued literacy of their operatives a secret: a supposedly ignorant, drunken Irish workforce would garner less sympathy among middle and upper-class reformers who had supported anti-corporate legislation. Perhaps this is one reason why comparatively few literary documents remain to assert the existence of Irish working-class literacy in the antebellum era. Yet traces of Irish literacy and working-class consciousness do remain—in church and public records, in library catalogs, in anti-Nativist working-class papers, and, most importantly, in the Boston *Pilot*, which became a widely circulating organ of Irish literacy and politics. To conclude my redefinition of New England working-class literacy and consciousness before the Civil War, I assert that a significant number of Irish workers in mill towns were not only literate, but practiced that literacy in ways strikingly similar to their Yankee counterparts. As I will show, Irish-American literacy was closely related to the conditions of working-class life that Yankee and Irish textile workers shared, particularly in the late 1840s through the Civil War. These conditions included the same sources of reprinted texts, and resulted in a similar emphasis, ironically, on the reading of British poetry and the publication of Irish-American poetry in the *Pilot*. While the Irish were outsiders in an increasingly cohesive working class, at least until the late 1840s, their practice of literacy reveals that they were consciously part of that class.

A denial of Irish literacy and class consciousness in antebellum New England depends upon the assumption that the Irish were largely segregated from Yankee workers and thus shared few working and living conditions; therefore, it is important to trouble this assumption in order to understand how Irish and Yankee workers were part of the

same class and expressed their awareness of this.⁴⁹ Interestingly, Harriet Hanson Robinson both perpetuated and undermined the idea of Irish segregation from Yankee workers in *Loom and Spindle*, in which she portrays the Irish of Lowell as the lowest caste of workers, beneath even the operatives. On one hand, despite their low status, she portrays Irish “scrubbers and waste pickers” as working beside Yankee operatives, so closely that doffers learned to speak “in true Hibernian fashion” (8). On the other hand, Robinson describes the “Acre,” a settlement of Irish laborers in Lowell that soon became the central Irish neighborhood, as a ghetto characterized by “disorder and riot,” stating that there were often fights between Yankee and Irish boys (9). Even though Robinson continued working as an operative until 1848, several years after the Lowell mills began to hire Irish women as operatives, she does not explicitly acknowledge the presence of Irish mill girls as co-workers.

Robinson portrays an uneasy and unequal coexistence between Yankee and Irish workers in the late 1830s and early 1840s that, in some ways, is corroborated by Brian C. Mitchell’s *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821-61*. Mitchell verifies that the Irish were employed mainly as laborers by the textile corporations, and that some were hired to unskilled positions in mill yards and on maintenance crews (83). He also portrays the Acre in the 1820s, then known as the “Paddy Camps,” as an isolated, undeveloped plot of land outside of town where huts were built haphazardly of scrap materials and mud by transient laborers, and conflict sometimes occurred between gangs from warring Irish counties (23-26). In the 1830s, however, Mitchell states that the “camps” became “distinct neighborhoods” coalescing around St. Patrick’s Cathedral with streets linking

⁴⁹ Moran, for example, writes, “As wage cuts continued, Irish immigrants began coming into the mills. For the Yankee women, the adventure in American industry was at an end” (43).

the Acre to the mill village (45). At this point, there was still segregation of Yankee from Irish workers, with some Yankees complaining that the commercial district of the Acre was unsafe (45).

Yet the growth of the Acre into a legitimate neighborhood meant opportunities for community organization and literacy. St. Patrick's ran a well-attended but underfunded parochial school in its basement, meaning that Irish children kept out of the public school still received an education (Mitchell 51). In 1835, an alliance between the Lowell public school committee and the parish created publicly-funded schools in the Acre run by Catholic teachers who controlled the curriculum (50-52).⁵⁰ As a result, the fear of Protestant proselytizing through public schooling diminished, enrollment skyrocketed, and the average daily school attendance "compared favorably" with the other public schools in Lowell (53). There were apparently enough readers in the Acre to merit the opening of a Catholic bookstore by Richard Walsh, who became an agent for the *Pilot*, and the Exchange Coffeehouse by Owen Donohoe, which became a meeting place and informal periodical library (73; 49).⁵¹ While the Irish of Lowell may still have been segregated by work and neighborhood from Yankee workers, their opportunities for literacy were growing more equal to that of Yankees.

The mid-1840s appears to be a turning point for the Irish community in Lowell and other mill towns such as nearby Lawrence, Massachusetts and Manchester, New Hampshire. The gradual hiring of Irish operatives and mechanics in the textile mills

⁵⁰ Interestingly, in the 1840s and '50s, young Irish women who had once worked in the mills became teachers in these schools (Mitchell 89). Interestingly, this parallels the limited upward mobility of many mill girls, who became teachers in the Lowell public schools and others across New England.

⁵¹ An advertisement for Walsh's bookstore appears in the *Lowell City Directory* and other papers (Mitchell 83). Mitchell states that Irish immigrants "shared a keen interest in the news of Great Britain regularly published in American newspapers and, in part, also carried by Irish emigrants" (68).

brought about an equalization of material circumstances and an intermingling of Irish and Yankees in and out of the workplace.⁵² In the late 1830s, more employment opportunities began opening up for Irish workers in the Lowell Machine Shop and the Middlesex Corporation, whose agent, Samuel Lawrence, had specifically recruited Irish workers from factory towns in Lancashire, England (Mitchell 79). Manchester and Lawrence, textile centers built by the Boston Associates, seem to have hired Irish workers in the mills from the start (79). In the mid-1840s, young Irish women began entering the Lowell mills as operatives, working alongside Yankee women in the spinning, carding, and weaving rooms (89).⁵³ It is crucial to note that while many scholars, including Mitchell, portray this as an abrupt changing of the guard from more privileged Yankee workers who fled when working conditions and pay deteriorated, the actual increase of Irish operatives in the mills was gradual; even during the Civil War, Irish and Yankee operatives worked together. According to Howard M. Gitelman, the Irish composed 20% of the workforce in Waltham, Massachusetts (another textile center controlled by the Boston Associates) in 1850, 51% in 1855, and 47% in 1860 (16). This means that in the decade before the Civil War, when the Irish supposedly “predominated overwhelmingly” in textile mills, about half of the workers in Waltham were Yankee (16).⁵⁴ Similarly, at the Hamilton Corporation in Lowell, 61.4% of workers were native-born in 1850, and many Yankee operatives were still employed at the mills in the late 1850s (Dublin 139).⁵⁵ Throughout the 1850s, Irish workers overcame prejudice that initially placed them in

⁵² The Irish population of Lowell more than doubled in the 1840s (Mitchell 83).

⁵³ Mitchell says that these first Irish operatives had been educated in Lowell schools (89). Twelve percent of Lowell’s Irish population worked in the mills by 1845 (90).

⁵⁴ Only a small percentage of non-Irish workers were “other” immigrants (Mitchell 86; Dublin 139).

⁵⁵ 20% of carders and spinners, 40% of weavers, and 73% of dressers were Yankee in the late 1850s (Dublin 163).

lower-paying rooms: in 1855, 60.9% of Irish operatives in Waltham were employed in the weaving room, where piece rates allowed workers to make higher wages than in the spinning and carding rooms (18). And, despite assumptions that wages fell dramatically for operatives when Irish workers entered the mills, average wages for operatives did not decrease radically between 1855 and 1860 in Waltham (Gitelman 12).⁵⁶ From these statistics, it is clear that Irish and Yankee operatives and machinists worked side by side from the mid-1840s until the Civil War, and that they were paid relatively the same wages. This reveals that a dramatic shift between a Yankee and Irish industrial work force did not take place, and that while ethnicity still presented community divisions, it did not create separate classes in mill towns in the late 1840s and throughout the 1850s.

Instead, striking similarities emerge between the material circumstances of Irish and Yankee workers from the mid-1840s onward that create common conditions for practicing literacy in the everyday lives of textile workers. Before the Irish were hired as operatives and machinists, there was a distinct difference in the domestic situations of Yankee and Irish workers: while a significant number of unmarried Yankee workers lived in corporate housing, most Irish workers lived in tenements as family units. As time progressed, however, more Yankee workers lived as family units, while more Irish operatives moved into boardinghouses—nearly 30% of Irish female operatives lived in boardinghouses by 1860 (Dublin 143, 167). While it is assumed that Yankee workers were largely transient and Irish workers became a permanent “factory population,” it appears that Yankee and Irish workers were equally transient in Waltham—only three names appearing on the 1865 payroll also appear on the 1850 payroll (Gitelman 251). Many Irish and Yankee families depended upon the income of older children, and it is

⁵⁶ Between 1855 and 1860 in Waltham, wages fell from \$13.74 per week to \$13.23 (Gitelman 12).

important to note that certification of at least some schooling was required by Yankee and Irish children in order to enter the mills.⁵⁷ In Lowell in 1860, 83% of mill workers' children, Yankee and Irish, attended school between the ages of six and nine; this number fell to 12.1% for ages fourteen to seventeen, with 73% of this age group working full-time (Dublin 178). While immigrant girls tended to leave school earlier than other children, there is otherwise no significant difference between the ethnic groups (179). In fact, Mitchell suggests that public education became "training" for mill workers, since they were required to produce certification in order to be hired (116). These statistics are important because they suggest that while the Irish may have been a separate class from Yankee operatives and machinists in the 1830s, they were no longer from the late 1840s onward. While ethnicity and religion continued to create boundaries between Yankee and Irish workers, their material circumstances, as well as their educational opportunities, were largely the same.

It is crucial to connect these statistics about labor and education to the literacy of Irish workers because the statistics suggest that Irish literacy, like the Irish presence in the mills, may not have been as dramatically different from Yankee literacy as often assumed. Interestingly, some of the scholars who offer these statistics do not consider this. While Gitelman disputes that Irish and Yankee workers in textile mills were segregated, for example, he maintains that their "off the job" lives must have been quite different from those of Yankee workers, as the Irish "generated no poetry, no newspapers, no lyceums." He explains this by stating that "they had neither the educational background nor the assurance of their place in society which had permitted

⁵⁷ Mitchell claims that in the 1850s, more Irish households were headed by women who ran boardinghouses while their children worked in the mills (103). This is the same situation that Larcom and Robinson describe from the decade before.

elements of high culture to flourish among an earlier workforce” (252). Gitelman’s claims are proven false not only by the education statistics above, but by other sources that suggest that social “assurance” was not necessary for access to literary texts. While no letters or memoirs by known Irish operatives have yet been located that distinctly portray the private reading habits of Irish workers, print resources shared with Yankee workers and, most importantly, the Boston *Pilot* provide an indirect portrayal of Irish literacy that is nonetheless undeniable.

To what extent did Irish workers draw upon the same sources of print as Yankee workers in mill towns? This question cannot be answered with certainty, but by the 1840s, mill towns like Lowell provided workers with multiple sources for cheap print, as I discussed earlier in the chapter. While membership lists have not survived to provide hard evidence that Irish workers patronized these libraries, their rules and regulations are not discriminatory, and the Lowell City and City School Libraries were welcoming to all city residents.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the large number of Irish-oriented titles in the catalogs of public and circulating libraries suggest that the sizeable Irish population of Lowell patronized them. The catalog of N.F. Merrill’s Circulating library, printed as a pamphlet for advertising purposes in 1846, contained not only a number of British novels and poetry volumes, but also an extraordinarily large selection of Irish novels, among them *Florence McCarthy, an Irish Tale*; *The Irish Widow, a Farce*; *O’Donnell, a National Tale*; *O’Halloran, an Irish Historical Tale of 1798*; and *Rory O’Moore, a National*

⁵⁸ In fact, a City Library report for 1860 shows that the library board had actively taken steps to increase patronage, hiring agents to “thoroughly canvas the city... the public schools, mechanic shops, mills and stores, to obtain subscribers” and “advertised monthly, in the public prints, the additions to the Library” (5). City Library Report, American Antiquarian Society.

Romance.⁵⁹ Similarly, the Lowell City Library, in its 1861 catalog, listed several volumes of Irish tales and ballads, as well as histories such as a four-volume *History of Ireland*, *Famine in Ireland*, *History of the Ancient Church of Ireland*, *Modern Revolutionary History and Literature of Ireland*.⁶⁰ The Lowell City School Library catalog of 1860 contains even more volumes about Ireland and the Irish, including more politically radical texts such as *United Irishmen*, *O'Conner's Chronicles of Erin*, and *The Memoirs of Daniel O'Connor*.⁶¹ The Irish holdings of these widely accessible libraries go beyond the standard and had increased since comparable catalogs in the 1830s, suggesting that the Irish were patrons and perhaps requested texts not only about but by Irish authors. The large number of Irish residents in Lowell, in conjunction with their participation in public schooling that promoted at least basic literacy, suggests that the increase of Irish texts in libraries that were courting a wider patronage is not simply a coincidence. At the very least, Irish workers had access to the same texts as Yankee workers in towns like Lowell.⁶²

More importantly, the *Voice of Industry*, which, as I have argued earlier in the chapter, promoted class consciousness through its literary content, included columns and poems about Ireland and the Irish throughout its two-year run. An adamantly non-sectarian paper, the *Voice* largely avoided the pitfalls of Nativism, and since it began publication after the mills started hiring Irish operatives and mechanics, the paper's

⁵⁹ Other Irish titles include *Tales of the O'Hara Family*, *The Exile of Erin*, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of Ireland*, *Fitzgeorge: A Novel*, and *Honor O'Hara*. N.F. Merrill's catalog is held at the American Antiquarian Society.

⁶⁰ Also, *Ireland and the Irish*, *Irish Abroad and at Home*, *Sketches of Irish Character*, and *Irish Confederates of 1798*. Lowell City Library Catalog, American Antiquarian Society.

⁶¹ Also, *Letters on the Condition of Ireland*, *Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation*, *Irish State Trials*, and *Irish Writers of the Seventeenth Century*. Lowell City School Library, American Antiquarian Society.

⁶² Library catalogs from Lawrence (The Pacific Mills Library and the Franklin Library Association) and Manchester (City Library of Manchester) in the 1850s and early 1860s also offered cheap access to a wide variety of standard titles, if not the variety of Irish texts offered in Lowell. American Antiquarian Society.

sympathetic Irish content reveals that it included Irish workers in its vision of working-class unity, in which literacy played an important part. Reprints from Irish and Irish-American papers, prose and poetry, appear in the paper, illustrating that a print dialogue existed between working-class and Irish papers. A column entitled “Freedom of the Public Lands,” reprinted from the *Irish Volunteer* of New York, condemns Nativism as a response to the surplus of laboring men in American cities. While the article admits that these workers drive down wages, it argues that the “people” must “[take] up the principle themselves,” banding together to find a “practical solution” to the problem, which, for the author, is free western land. It is significant that the *Voice* reprinted this column, as it not only condemns Nativism but also advocates practical consensus among workers apart from a political party or ethnic allegiance. The *Voice* also reprints the poem “Be Patient” from the *Dublin Nation*, which likens the growth of freedom in Ireland to the growth of wheat. Employing agrarian imagery during a time of famine, the poem’s description of the wheat’s growth becomes politically charged, from the “silent undergrowth” of roots, to the wheat-ears growing “so imperceptibly, that ye can mark no change nor throe,” and finally to the “silent” way of “ripening” that results in the “whole broad land ...tongued in fire, on freedom’s harvest day.” By reprinting this poem, the *Voice* not only supports Irish nationalism and protests England’s role in perpetuating the Famine, but also encourages readers to employ the same analogy to the Ten Hour Movement, which the *Voice* was then sponsoring. This shows that the paper connected Irish and American working-class politics, encouraging unity between disparate groups.

More compelling evidence for the *Voice*’s inclusion of the Irish in its readership can be found in a poem by “Eloisa” of Boston entitled “The Death-Cry of Erin.” A plea

for aid for Famine victims, the poem begins with a description of the “wild, despairing cry” of “Erin’s starving thousands” that can be heard over the Atlantic’s “roar.”

Portraying Erin as a poor mother who cannot feed her children, Eloisa pleads with Americans to “send her more” bread. The most interesting thing about the poem, aside from its sympathy for Irish famine victims, is its inclusion under a new heading, “Communications,” described as a department “intended to contain the thoughts and sentiments of the people, prompted by a humane spirit, and clothed in their own language, which may be in some degree varied and conflicting.” This description acknowledges that “the people”—the paper’s working-class readers—come from different perspectives, but that, despite their “varied and conflicting” language, they are part of the same class. Eloisa’s plea for Famine relief within the *Voice* suggests a readership of Irish workers who, like Yankee workers, express their political ideas through poetry, and do so as part of a coherent working class.

This is most evident in the Boston *Pilot*, an Irish working-class newspaper that concretely reveals that Gitelman’s denial of the existence of Irish poetry, newspapers, and lyceums is false by providing evidence of all three. Started by an Irish poet and nationalist and based in Boston, a hub of Irish immigration, the *Pilot*, which was initially called the *Jesuit* and then, for a short time, the *Literary and Catholic Sentinel*, began as a primarily Catholic paper that devoted a page or two to specifically Irish issues. In the 1840s and ‘50s, however, the paper became overtly Irish, focusing on the Famine as well as the situation of Irish immigrants in New England. In a February 1846 issue, for instance, the editors reminded readers of the paper’s goals—“the elevation of the Irish character in this country, the independence of Ireland, and the overthrow of sectarian

prejudice”—and that the paper was not religious “in the common sense of that term.”

During this time period, the paper became a communication network for Irish immigrants throughout the Northeast and even beyond, with agents as far away as New Orleans.

Published by and for the Irish, the *Pilot* became, at first by default, a working-class paper, as its content was designed for readers with little class mobility.⁶³ With growing consciousness of itself as an Irish Catholic and not simply a Catholic paper, however, the *Pilot* became more overt in its articulation of class consciousness and politics.⁶⁴

Functioning as a hub of Irish Catholic culture, the content and circulation of the *Pilot* are the most compelling arguments for literacy and class consciousness among the Irish of New England. While education statistics, the availability of libraries, and inclusion in labor papers *suggest* that the Irish were participating in working-class print culture, the *Pilot's* list of circulation agents, advertisements for bookstores, notices for lyceums, political reporting, and inclusion of poetry provides specific evidence of the existence and shape of Irish working-class literacy.

The *Pilot's* regular listing of and advertisements for circulation agents as well as advertisements for lyceums and lectures in the 1830s through the 1850s reveals the breadth and the scope of Irish literary culture in New England. In early 1835, the *Pilot*

⁶³ According to Roediger, the most mobility that Irish immigrants were given during the antebellum period was to become skilled workers and farmers, but these were among the minority (139). He quotes the statistic that in Boston in 1850, 23% of Irish workers were in skilled trades and 47% in unskilled trades (145). The remaining “independent” Irish workers were “only nominally or precariously so” (145). On the other hand, Brian Mitchell and William Moran both refer to an Irish “middle class” composed of shop owners and the foremen of laboring crews, yet they also admit that this group amassed little wealth and continued to live among poorer Irish immigrants (47-8, 101;). It seems that Moran and Mitchell use the term “middle class” as a way of identifying gradations of privilege and values within the Irish community itself, but not within American culture as a whole. Because the material circumstances of shop owners and foremen were not very different from operatives and laborers—they lived in the same neighborhoods and were equally excluded from mainstream avenues of power—and because they were united in their low economic status by their ethnicity, I consider both groups part of the working class.

⁶⁴ This becomes particularly evident in the 1850s with the appearance of a regular column entitled “Practical Lessons for the Working Classes” in which, among other things, readers are encouraged to read in their spare time and attend evening schools.

published a list of thirty-six agents, half of whom were scattered around New England cities such as Lowell, Waltham, and the Boston neighborhood of Charlestown. Five agents were located in Canada, through which many Irish immigrants entered New England in the 1830s; a handful were located in the eastern and southern cities of New York, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans. Interestingly, the scope of the *Pilot* included agents in Michigan, Tennessee, and Alabama.⁶⁵ That the core readership was northeastern and urban, however, is reflected in the agents that chose to advertise their bookstores in the *Pilot*. Bookstores in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia advertised, in one advertisement's words, their "extensive cheap establishment[s]." In addition to Catholic booksellers, the *Pilot* also featured ads for literary magazines, including the *Albion*, described as "News, Politics, and Literature of Europe, more particularly of Great Britain," and the *Novelist*, with the purpose "to furnish the public, in a cheap and convenient form, the most popular novels of the day, by the best English novelists." The Hibernian Lyceum of Boston advertised lecture series, and a notice announced the purchase of the Hibernian Hall of Boston to hold various meetings, literary and political. These literary advertisements mirror those found in working-class newspapers such as the *Artisan* and the *Voice of Industry*, showing that Irish workers were also interested in reading a variety of texts—from religious texts to reprinted English fiction—and in intellectual advancement through lyceum lectures.

In the 1840s, when Boston bookseller Patrick Donohoe became the paper's publisher and editor, the *Pilot* began encouraging literary reading more explicitly, featuring literary criticism with a specifically Irish working-class bent. The February 14,

⁶⁵ The agent list closely resembles trade routes from Britain to Canada, the Atlantic coast, and Gulf of Mexico. Irish immigrants traveled to North America on these same routes (Mitchell 16).

1846 issue includes the column “A Short Dissertation upon People’s Reading and Thinking for Themselves, suggested by five minutes meditation over the pages of the Olive Branch.” The *Olive Branch* was similar to the *Lowell Offering*, and like the *Voice*’s critique of the *Offering*, Donohoe suggests that the contributors to the paper unthinkingly parrot ideas and should stop defaming “some of its own party who have been reading and thinking for themselves with great independence.” This is significant because it connects the *Pilot* and Irish working-class readers to the representation debate within the New England working-class community, showing that they had a stake in literary representation, as well. Another 1846 issue includes a review of Longfellow’s *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems*, giving it a negative evaluation from a distinctly Irish perspective: “the deplorable ignorance, the intellectual degradation of [the Irishman], and his fellow countrymen are made the theme of pathetic lamentation,” despite the rich literary traditions of Ireland and the Irishman’s familiarity with English and French authors, complains Donohoe. Longfellow’s poems, Donohoe asserts, reveal that Americans lack literary judgment, for he finds the collection singularly unoriginal. After providing several quotations to support his point, Donohoe ends the review by stating that Irish readers will not approve of Longfellow because their “ears have been vitiated by the jingles of Moore’s Melodies, or Father Prout’s Ballads, or the Songs of the Nation.” On the other hand, the January 3, 1846 issue includes a positive review of Irish literature that calls Irish writers “mind laborers” who write for “every class,” not simply the upper classes. The inclusion of literary criticism in the *Pilot* that viewed literature through a distinctly Irish working-class lens illustrates that reading *belles lettres* was important to

Irish workers and, furthermore, that this reading became an aspect of their class consciousness.

Perhaps distaste for American cultural superiority paired with the desire to encourage the reading of poetry led the *Pilot* to reprint British poetry despite the paper's Irish Nationalist position. Just as in the comparison between the *Artisan* and the *Voice of Industry's* patterns of reprinting, the *Pilot* reprints more British poems in the 1830s and features more original poetry in the 1840s and '50s. And, similar to those papers, the *Pilot* often includes Romantic poetry. In 1834, the *Jesuit* reprinted two poems by Felicia Hemans, "Maternal Affections" and "Wood Hymn," a poem that chronicles a walk through the forest during which God is revealed through nature. Another poem, "On Visiting a Scene of Childhood," reprinted from *Blackwood's Magazine*, looks back on the familiar landscape of the speaker's childhood—"green banks," "wild flowers," and "the river, all quiet and bright"—only to realize he will never return. Similar to Huldah Stone's "Remains of Earth," which quoted Hemans, the poem concludes that readers must look to "realms that endure," meaning heaven, and "that triumph sublime," meaning the transcendence of earth. In 1836, lines from Coleridge are quoted at the beginning of a column entitled "Domestic Retirement," a reflection that compares the lives of warriors with those of average men. This column happens to be on the same page as an Irish legend entitled "O'Cahan, of Dungiven," about a medieval Irish warrior, which had been "translated from the Irish of Flemming, for the Pilot." It seems rather curious that Coleridge would be used as an epigraph to a column meant to introduce the legend, but it follows the same pattern seen in the *Artisan*, in which reprinted poems are indirectly linked to other columns. The lines from Coleridge evoke an Irish country scene,

portraying a “Halcyon daughter of the skies” dwelling in a “cottage vale” and listening to “Sabbath bells.” Despite the British origin of these lines, and the political ironies implicit in reprinting them beside an Irish legend, the *Pilot* clearly finds Romantic discourse pertinent to its Irish working-class message.

As in the *Voice of Industry*, Romantic influence is seen in Irish-authored poetry—some reprinted from Irish papers, some written by Irish Americans—that appears in the *Pilot*. In the January 17, 1835 issue, the paper reprinted two poems from Irish Nationalist papers on the front page, each blending the Romantic focus on nature with a radical political consciousness. The first poem, celebrating the heroic sacrifice of patriots’ lives for freedom, begins by comparing the spilled blood of freemen to a sunset:

There is a crimson hue
Of purer, lovelier dye
That beams in blushing clouds, that strews
Soft evening’s radiant sky:--
It is the life-blood of the free,
Poured nobly forth for liberty!

Another poem, reprinted from the Dublin *Weekly Freeman’s Journal*, interestingly echoes the poem from *Blackwood’s* by celebrating the landscape of the “home of my infancy” and connecting that landscape to those who dwell in it, calling them “people of torrents and rills.” The poem also references the Coleridge excerpt when it describes the “soul of enchantment” singing “to the eloquent daughters, whose home is the vale and the air.”

In the 1840s and '50s, poems contributed by Irish readers also reveal a Romantic influence, showing that Irish workers, like their Yankee counterparts, were readers of Romantic poetry. In 1846, the poem "Repeal and No Surrender" portrays a mystical connection between nature and those who dwell in it to expose the plight of oppressed Famine victims. Comparing the "naked hills" and the "cabins poor," the poet describes the death of the landscape in order to spur readers to nationalist fervor:

Look round! Look round! The land is dead!
A lovely corse it seems
So drooping hangs its languid head
So silent are its streams;
No sign of life except the strife
Our dashing bosoms render,
Oh! Could they bound at the trumpet sound!
Repeal and no surrender!

While this poem employs Romanticism to inspire political militancy, another poem, "The Music of Nature," written "for the Pilot" by Mrs. J.L. Leprohan, evokes the quiet, pious tone of Hemans' poems. Declaring that the "magic power" of music is alive in nature, the poem catalogs the ways music can be heard through one's surroundings:

There's music in the signing tone
Of the soft, south'rn breeze,
That whispers through the flowers lone
And bends the stately trees
And in the mighty tempest's voice

The crested breaker's roar,
The stormy winds that land rejoice
Bowling the forests hoar!

Revealing the different outlooks of Irish readers, these two poems nonetheless provide evidence that, like the working-class readers of the *Artisan* and the *Voice of Industry*, the readers of the *Pilot* were readers and writers of Romantic poetry. Furthermore, as the content of the *Pilot* suggests, the Irish of New England—most of them laborers, operatives, and mechanics—were hardly the ignorant, degraded population that Donohoe sarcastically mentions in his Longfellow review. Instead, given their access to public education and to print through libraries, the working-class press, and newspapers like the *Pilot*, the Irish workers of New England practiced literacy in much the same way as native-born workers, valuing the ability to “read and think for oneself” and thus finding ways to practice literacy despite long working hours and slim economic resources. Despite claims to the contrary, the Irish, like the mythical Yankee mill girls, were, in Robinson's words, “poets of the loom, spinners of verse” (70).

While the prolonged debate over the existence of class consciousness among antebellum American workers has made working-class readers nearly invisible in literary history, the texts I have examined in this chapter—Larcom and Robinson's autobiographies, the *New England Artisan*, the *Voice of Industry*, and the *Boston Pilot*—illustrate how underground reading strategies become a marker of class. Larcom and Robinson, contributors to the corporate-sponsored literary magazine, the *Lowell Offering*, depict an ambivalence about the working-class status of mill girls, superficially providing

support for what I call the “genteel literacy narrative”; yet their representations of practicing literacy despite inadequate schooling, little recreational time, and low wages correspond with the underground reading practices of British working-class autobiographers and become a means of communicating their working-class status. The “class feeling” that Larcom and Robinson suggest in their representations of reading becomes magnified in the context of the *New England Artisan* and *Voice of Industry*, self-consciously working-class papers that actively sought to encourage class consciousness in a diverse working-class population. These papers, through their reprinting of Romantic poetry and the influence of Romantic discourse upon their reporting, represent a coherent and literate New England working class that regarded literacy as a means of achieving class consciousness. Likewise, the Boston *Pilot* prioritizes the literacy of Irish working-class readers, reprinting British poetry and including distinctly working-class literary criticism in order to represent Irish workers as literate and class-conscious. Taken together, these scenes of working-class literacy challenge the invisibility of class during the antebellum era and assert that literacy was not limited to a small group of “genteel” workers.

These texts also reveal that, like the British working classes and African Americans, American antebellum workers participated in transatlantic literary culture dominated by the reprint industry. Practices of reprinting, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, made texts widely available and therefore easily assimilated into various print contexts, allowing African Americans and white workers to increase their literacy and to employ literary discourse for the purpose of self-representation. By reading *belles lettres*, texts assumed to be the literal and figurative property of the upper classes, African

Americans and white workers in America and Britain participated in transatlantic literary culture and, in representing this literacy in their writing, revealed the subversive power of underground literacy in the antebellum era.

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